

DRACO DORMIENS

[Cassandraclaire](#)

It was June, and it was boiling hot in the Potions dungeon, but Snape didn't care. "Can anyone tell me what this is?" he asked his miserable class, all of whom were stifling their robes, and he lifted a beaker of glutinous brown liquid high into the air so they could all get a gander at it.



Hermione's hand shot into the air, as usual.

"Polyjuice Potion," she said promptly, and gave a little shudder. She was probably recalling how it tasted, thought Harry with an inward grin, remembering the afternoon three years ago when he, Ron and Hermione had all drunk the shape-changing potion in an attempt to turn themselves into replicas of Slytherin students so they could sneak into the Slytherin common room.

Snape ignored her. "Anyone?" he said, scanning the class.

Draco Malfoy raised a pale, lazy hand into the air. "Polyjuice Potion," he drawled out of the corner of his mouth. Harry glared at him. Where the rest of

the class looked sweaty and miserable, Draco looked as cool as if he'd just eaten a bag of Ice Mice.

"Very good, Draco!" said Snape enthusiastically. "Five points for Slytherin. Now," he went on, "Can anyone tell me what it does?" He rounded suddenly on Ron, who blinked. "Weasley?"

Ron, startled in mid-yawn, said, "It, er, changes you into somebody else."

Snape, looking disappointed, said, "That's correct." He did not give five points to Gryffindor, however, only picked up the vial and began dispensing measured amounts into small paper cups. "Now," he said, straightening up, "I'll be splitting you into groups of two. You'll each be drinking half a cup of Polyjuice Potion with a hair from each of your heads in it....no, you don't have to swallow the hair, Miss

Brown.....there's enough potion to turn you into your partner for half an hour exactly. No more, no less. That'll give you an idea how the potion's supposed to work. Tomorrow, you'll try making it yourself, then drinking it. I warn you, however," he said, directing this last bit to Neville, "that making a mistake with Polyjuice potion can have...unpleasant consequences. You might

end up half yourself and half the other person, never able to return to your true appearance."

Neville squeaked.



"Right then," said Snape, "Miss Patil and Miss Brown, come up," and Lavender and Parvati came up to the desk, took a cup of Polyjuice potion, and sat down, giggling. Snape quickly paired off Crabbe and Goyle with each other, put poor Neville with bulldog-faced Pansy Parkinson (who cast a longing look at Draco as she went over to sit by Neville -- if she couldn't have Draco, she seemed to be thinking, at least she could be him for a while.) Ron was paired with Hermione, and Harry...

"Potter," said Snape, in an icy, amused voice, "and Malfoy, come up here."

Draco's jaw dropped; so did Harry's. "No!" they said, in unison.

"I won't be Malfoy," said Harry in a furious voice, but Snape was not impressed.

"Get up here, both of you," he said.

Malfoy was the first to get to his feet. Casting an icy glance at Harry, he stalked up to the front of the room, grabbed the potion, and stalked back to where Harry was sitting. Harry cast an anguished glance at Ron and Hermione, who gazed back in sympathy. Ron shook his head; Hermione mouthed something at Harry that he didn't quite catch, but he knew Hermione well enough to know what she was saying, *You'd better go along with it Harry, it'll count towards your final marks!*

All over the room, students were drinking down the potion -- there were gasps and giggles from Lavender and Parvati, a yell from Neville, who, having transformed himself into the much larger Pansy Parkinson, suddenly found himself being choked by too-small robes, and helpless laughter from Ron and Hermione.

"Here," said Draco, thrusting the cup at Harry, who looked at him with loathing. "Well, I haven't poisoned it, Potter, drink it," he said.

"I'd rather drink poison than turn into you, Malfoy," said Harry between his teeth.

"And I'm not looking forward to being a speccy git for half an hour, but you don't see me whinging on about it," said Draco. "Or are you afraid?"

Harry pushed his chair back violently, and grabbed the cup, into which Draco had already put one of his own silvery-blond hairs. He pulled out one of his own hairs, took a mouthful of potion, dropped his hair into the cup, and handed the cup back to Draco, who drained it.



At the same time, they swallowed.

Draco doubled up, gasping, as a horrible feeling, as if his skin were melting, washed over him. He threw out a hand to steady himself, and another wave of nausea broke over him as he saw his skin turning from pale to brown, his own fingernails (kept perfectly manicured by house-elves) turning into Harry's bitten ones. From somewhere above his head, he heard Harry say, "Urrrgh!" and he threw his head back, tears leaking out of the corners of his eyes, and saw ---

--A pale, pointed face looking back at him, his own silvery-grey eyes blinking behind Harry's round spectacles. As he gazed, his vision blurred, and he realized that Harry couldn't see without his glasses -- and now, neither could he.

"Give me your glasses, Potter," he said, and Harry, obviously shaken, did so.

Harry, feeling ill, looked down at his new body. In real life he wasn't any shorter than Draco, so his robes fit all right, but he felt naked without his glasses. He looked up and saw his own face staring back, chalk-white with surprise, but with a bit of a grin on it.

"Wha -- what's funny?" he said, wincing to hear Draco's voice coming out of his mouth.

"I was just thinking that I really am astonishingly handsome," said Draco in Harry's voice. "I could kiss myself. I mean, seriously, in this particular situation, I could kiss myself."

"You're a stupid prat, Malfoy," said Harry dispassionately, and walked away. He went over to Ron and Hermione, who were busy laughing, although they stopped abruptly when Harry walked up, and gaped at him.

"It's me," said Harry.

"Oh, Harry!" said Hermione, screwing up her -- Ron's -- face, "how awful for you!"

Ron shook his head. "I dunno if I can talk to you while you look like that.
It's....creepy."



"Well, you look pretty stupid yourselves," said Harry irritably.

"Now you even sound like Malfoy," said Ron, and Harry, even more irritated, went back and sat down by Draco, who had his arms crossed over his chest and was staring into space. As soon as Harry sat down, Malfoy muttered, "Enjoying being me, Potter?"

"No one can stand me like this," said Harry. "But I suppose you're used to that, Malfoy."

Draco turned his eyes on Harry, who squirmed. It was really difficult to look at Draco and see his own face screwed up with dislike, the green

eyes he saw every morning in the mirror now regarding him with contempt. If Draco felt the same compunction, he didn't show it. "Do you remember what I told you that time on the train, Potter?" he asked.

"Which time," said Harry in a bored tone, "the time where you threatened to hold me down and force-feed me slugs or the time you called me a four-eyed toad?"

Draco snorted with mirth. "The time I told you I could help you out," he said. "Any time you want to throw over that overgrown git and that puffy-haired Mudblood you hang around with, I can show you how to get your hands on some real power."

"Let me think about that," said Harry, slowly. "Right, I've thought about it. No."

Draco's now-green eyes sparkled with malice behind Harry's glasses. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," Harry snapped his anger building. "You can take me off the evil mailing list, Malfoy, I am not interested."

Harry rather expected Malfoy to make a rude response to this, but instead Malfoy was staring at him with an odd expression. "What is it," said Harry, glancing down, "am I changing back?"

"That's just it," said Malfoy. "You're not. Everyone else has. Look."

Harry glanced around and saw that this was true. Everyone had resumed their seats, back in their own bodies. Snape had gone back to lecturing about the uses of Polyjuice Potion, apparently confident that all his students were back to their rightful selves. Harry looked wildly down at himself, then back at Draco.

"How -- how long's it been?"

"Forty-five minutes," said Draco, consulting his Rolex. "We ought to have changed back by now."

"Well, what's going on?"

Malfoy shook his head, an odd little smile on his face. "I wish I knew," he said.

Harry's heart began to pound wildly. "Did you do something to the Potion?" he hissed. "Malfoy--"

"Of course not, Potter," said Malfoy with contempt, "d'you really think I want--"

But Harry wasn't listening. He grabbed hold of Draco's robe and yanked him forward. "Turn me back!" he hissed

violently. "Do it now, or I'll break your face!"



Malfoy, who wasn't used to Muggle expressions like "break your face", looked at Harry blankly. Then he started to laugh. This was too much for Harry, who swung at Draco and landed a solid punch on his jaw, which knocked him to the floor. His quill, cauldron, and books rained down around him. Harry jumped down out of his seat, grabbed Draco by the front of his robes, and the two of them rolled over and over, hitting at each other with relish.

The rest of the class swung around to look at them, and Snape began running towards them, shouting at them to desist. Harry let go of Draco, suddenly shocked, but Draco, apparently thinking Harry was about to hit him again, lunged upward and landed a perfect uppercut to Harry's chin. Harry, who had been looking over at Snape, was unprepared for this assault. He flew backward and slammed into the wall, knocking his head hard against the ancient stone. Everything went black.

Draco stood up and leaned against his desk, gasping for breath. Harry had knocked the wind out of him. Fighting the ringing noise in his ears, he looked around. There was Harry -- still looking like Draco -- lying sprawled on the stone floor, blood pooling under his head. Draco looked away, suddenly afraid he was about to get in some real trouble, and saw Snape, struggling to restrain a frantic Ron and Hermione, who were fighting to get to him. As he watched, Hermione broke free and ran to him, seizing him by the sleeve of his robes. "Harry," she sobbed. "Are you all right?"

Draco just stared at her blankly. *She thought he was Harry.* He looked up, saw the stunned faces of the Gryffindors watching him, the scowls on the faces of the Slytherins. *They all thought he was Harry.*

Snape strode forward and peeled Hermione off him, shoving her aside. Draco could hear the buzzing as the other students yelled at Snape -- the Slytherins were silent, but the Gryffindors were all shouting that Draco had punched Harry first.

Snape came oozing up to Draco and peered into his face. "Potter," he said. "Can you explain this to me?"

Draco opened his mouth to say, "I'm not Potter, the Polyjuice Potion isn't working, it should have worn off by now and it hasn't--"

But what came out was, "I don't know, Professor. He hit me first."

What happened after that was a bit of a blur for Draco. He was marched up to the hospital wing by Snape, who was carrying Harry's limp body, the sight of which gave Draco a queasy feeling whenever he looked at it. He kept feeling his own face, his hair, to see if he'd begun turning back into himself, but he hadn't. Nothing happened.

Madam Pomfrey was waiting for them; she instructed Snape to lay Harry down on a bed surrounded by curtains, into which she vanished. Draco wound up sitting in a hard chair across from Snape, who was staring at him, eyes glittering with malice.

"If Draco dies," he hissed in an undertone, "you'll be a murderer, Potter. How do you like that?"

Draco's mouth sagged open in shock, but before he could say anything, Madam Pomfrey emerged and shook her head at Snape. "Draco Malfoy is not going to die," she said severely. "He's got a nasty bump on the head and he'll probably be out until morning, but he's otherwise perfectly fine."

A look of relief flashed across Snape's face. Draco was touched. This wore off quickly, however, as Snape jabbed a finger into his solar plexus and hissed, "I'm not even going to bother taking points from Gryffindor, Potter. I'm going straight to Dumbledore." And he stood up and stalked out of the room.

Madam Pomfrey snorted. "I wouldn't worry, Harry," she said, "He's all talk. Dumbledore knows what Draco Malfoy's like. Now sit still." And she began sponging the cuts on his face. "You'll have a lovely black eye, Potter," she said, "and a cut lip. What did you-"

But the door of the infirmary burst open and Ron and Hermione came pouring in, their eyes lighting up when they saw Draco. Madam Pomfrey leaped up to head them off, and Draco took the opportunity to sidle over to Harry's bed and look down at him.

It was a horrible feeling, like one of those dreams where he was dead and looking down at his own body. Harry lay with his arms crossed, still looking exactly like Draco in every particular, his white-blond hair bloody where his head had hit the wall. Draco felt a wave of nausea overcome him and he stepped back, which was fortunate because at that moment Ron and Hermione hit him head-on like a bullet train. "Harry, oh Harry!" Hermione was exclaiming, "Are you OK?"

Ron was more interested in clapping him on the back and congratulating him on the uppercut he'd delivered to Harry in Potions. Draco allowed himself a smile. "It was fantastic, wasn't it?" he agreed. "The way he just flew backwards!"

Madam Pomfrey shoed them towards the door, which Ron was now holding open. Draco gave a last glance back at Harry as they left the infirmary. He hadn't moved.

Draco trailed after Ron and Hermione as they hurried back towards Gryffindor Tower. Ron kept up a steady stream of chatter, the topic of which seemed to be how pleased everyone in Gryffindor would be that Harry had nearly killed Draco Malfoy in Potions. "Fred and George are thrilled," said Ron, "they hate that slimy git, he never plays fair at Quidditch-"

"No more do they!" yelled Malfoy in indignation, then clapped his hand over his mouth, but they had reached the portrait of the Fat Lady now and he got busy looking like his head really hurt so no one would look to him for the password.

"Boomslang," said Ron, and when the portrait swung forward, Draco followed him into the common room. Fred and George Weasley, sitting by the fire, greeted them with shouts of welcome. Draco looked around the room in irritation --- the common room here was much nicer than the Slytherin one, which, being in the dungeon, was

cold and had a tendency to drip during the winter. He would definitely be complaining to his father about this when he got his body back.

He trailed Ron and Hermione slowly over to the fire -- he detested Fred and George, not just because they always hit the Bludgers right at him during Quidditch matches, but also because they'd become really obnoxious ever since they'd opened up their own mail-order joke shop, the stock for which was now trading at over a hundred Galleons a share on the MSE (Magical Stock Exchange.) They'd even taken a year off school to run the thing. Draco had not missed them.

"HARRY!" George yelled, thwacking Draco hard on the back. "Heard you had a go at Malfoy in Potions, good work."

"He's been asking for a nice hard thumping for years," agreed Fred.

"Pity you didn't kill him is all," said George.

Draco felt his face working, and, knowing it'd be a dead giveaway he pulled out his wand and cursed Fred and George with boils, he took a few deep, calming breaths instead. Then he felt a small hand wrap around his arm and he saw Hermione next to him, looking up at him with concern.

"Are you all right, Harry? You sound like you can't breathe," she said.

"Head...hurts," said Draco with difficulty, and sat down hard in a chair.

"Not your scar?" said Ron, looking green. "Your scar doesn't hurt?"

"No, idiot," said Draco, through his teeth, "just my head where that fool Harry - where Draco banged it against the floor."

"So why did Draco attack you like that, Harry?" asked Hermione, brown eyes wide.

"Because he's a rotten little snake, why else?" said Ron.

Draco bristled. "I insulted his mother," he said shortly. "So he punched me."

"Harry!" said Hermione.

"Good on you," said Ron, "for punching him back."

"There's no point insulting Malfoy," Hermione went on. "I think you should try to feel sorry for him, Harry --"

"Sorry for him!" Draco yelled. "Why? He's rich, his family's powerful, he's good-looking and the ladies love him--"

"He's got that terrible father," said Hermione severely. "And he's obviously very jealous of you, Harry, you're such a good Quidditch player, and so brave, and he isn't, remember that time in the Forbidden Forest when he ran away from Quirrell?"

Draco made a strangled noise.

"And he isn't any better-looking than you, Harry," said Hermione, avoiding his eyes.

"But he's-" Draco stammered, "He's -- blond!"

Ron and Hermione stared at him.

"I'm tired," said Draco in a strangled voice. "I'm going to bed."

As he went up the dormitory stairs, followed by Ron, Draco's mind raced. He had always assumed that Potter and his friends hated him as much as he hated them. Well, it looked like Weasley probably did, but Hermione...advocating that they feel sorry for him? A Mudblood feel sorry for Draco Malfoy? He clenched his hands in rage and slammed the dormitory door behind him.

"Aack!" yelled Ron in pain, have been hit in the nose by the slamming door.

"Oh," said Draco, "Sorry."

Hermione sat for a long time in front of her mirror that night, one elbow on her tattered copy of "Affirmations for Witches Who Do Too Much" and the other on an equally tattered copy of "Witches Who Love Wizards and the Wizards Who Don't Notice." She sighed; it wasn't exactly true anymore that Harry didn't notice she loved him, she'd told him so last month, when she couldn't stand it any more, and he'd been very nice about it, but very clear.



He didn't love her.

He'd told her how he felt about Cho, and she said she'd sort of known it anyway, and they'd both sort of laughed, and he'd told her how much her friendship meant to him, and that had been it. Hermione still got a sick feeling in her stomach when she thought about it.

But tonight, she thought -- tonight had been different, it seemed to her that Harry had been looking at her in a new way, as if...as if he was seeing her for the first time. Of course, that might have been the head injury. She put her face in her hands. Please, she thought, please let it not have been the head injury.

In the hospital wing, Harry, still unconscious, was lost in a horrible dream in which he was lost in the Forbidden Forest....he was looking for something...Ron was with him, but where was Hermione? He yelled aloud without waking up, and Dumbledore, in whispered conference with Madam Pomfrey, broke off and looked over at him anxiously.

"There is a great deal of darkness in that Malfoy boy," he told Madam Pomfrey, who sniffed doubtfully. She had never liked Draco much. "I fear," said the Headmaster, "that it may someday overpower him."

Taking a shower the next morning was probably the strangest experience of Draco's life. He kept his eyes screwed shut so he wouldn't see Harry naked, but when he did look down by accident, his jaw dropped in amazement. "Well, would you look at that," he said, trying not to. "Congratulations, Potter."

It was strange going to all of Harry's classes, thought Draco. It was a relief when they got to Care of Magical Creatures class, which the Gryffindors had with the Slytherins anyway. They were currently studying grindleflerberts: nasty little amphibious creatures with big, tooth-lined jaws. When Hagrid went back to his house to get more flobberworms to feed them, Crabbe and Goyle took the opportunity to abduct Neville's toad and hold it over the cage of grindleflerberts, who slavered hungrily.

"Har har," sneered Goyle, who was gripping Trevor the toad while Crabbe held off Neville with one arm. "Do you want me to feed your toad to the monsters, likkle boy?"

"Please, no!" Neville begged. "Leave Trevor alone!"

Neville was practically in tears. Draco watched, sniggering, until he became aware of Hermione's eyes on him. They were imploring. Oh, right, he recalled, I'm Harry Potter, Wonder Boy. Hermione obviously expected him to Do Something, so with a sigh, he went up to Goyle and said,

"Goyle, give the boy back his toad."

Goyle's piggy eyes narrowed. "Make me," he said, tightening his grip on Trevor.

Draco was used to Goyle doing everything he said, so that rocked him for an instant. This might turn unpleasant, he realized. He'd seen Goyle wreck a city bus with his bare hands before, he didn't want to be next.

"Goyle," he said, lowering his voice now so only the two of them could hear, "Did you know I could read minds?"

Goyle stared at him blankly.

"It's true," said Draco. "It's the magical power of my scar," he added, wondering if even Goyle was dim enough to believe this malarky.

"I don't believe you," he said slowly, but there was a fear in his small eyes.

"For instance, I could tell everyone here that you sleep with your night light on, you wear pink frilly underwear because it makes you feel pretty, and you're secretly in love with Crabbe -- you've got a photo of him under your pillow."

Goyle let out a yell of horror, shoved the toad at Draco, and took off running. For such a big fellow, he moved pretty fast and was soon out of sight.

"Here you go, Longbottom," said Draco, thrusting Trevor at Neville, who looked at him gratefully. He caught sight of Hermione gazing at him; she looked full of admiration and blushed when he looked at her. No one had ever looked at Draco like that before; it made him feel odd, and rather tingly around the ears. Furious, he trod purposefully on Seamus Finnegan's toe as he headed back towards Hermione, and was pleased to hear him howl with pain.

Madam Pomfrey watched Draco Malfoy sleeping with a mixture of dislike and concern. She didn't like the boy, but she couldn't help feeling sorry for him, he was obviously having terrible nightmares, lashing out with his hands and screaming. Suddenly his eyes flew open and he looked at her, seeming horrified.

"You're awake!" she said brightly.

"What's going on?" he demanded, sitting up. "Where am I?"

"Shush, Draco, you've had a bad bump on your head, you need to rest," she said, forcing him back down.

"I'm not Draco Malfoy!" he shrieked, his silver-gray eyes wide. "I'm not Malfoy! I'm not!"

Madam Pomfrey was horrified, this was worse than she had thought. "Here, drink this," she said, forcing a cup filled with sleeping potion between the boy's lips. He swallowed reflexively and fell back on the pillows, eyes closing.

Madam Pomfrey stood up, shaking her head; she didn't care what Dumbledore said, it was time to send an owl to this boy's father telling him to come and take his son home.

Chapter Two - Harry at the Manor

After lunch Harry had Quidditch practice. Draco got to the practice field early and sat in a patch of sunlight, twirling Harry's Firebolt in his hand--it was pretty to look at, he had to admit that. His dad had refused to buy him one until he beat Harry at Quidditch - which, Draco had pointed out, he wasn't likely to do until he got a Firebolt to match Harry's.

A flicker of movement at the corner of his eye alerted him to the presence of someone else on the field, someone who was walking towards him. It was a very pretty girl in blue robes; her long black hair was braided down her back. Draco recognized her vaguely as the Ravenclaw Seeker, someone he'd played against before.

"Hello, Harry!" she called in a singsong voice.

Draco waved. He was still examining the Firebolt. He was, in fact, rather nervous about this practice session. Harry had a very distinctive flying style, and, well ... Draco didn't like to admit this, but Harry was, in fact, a better flier than he was. His teammates might --

The girl flopped down on the grass next to him, breaking his train of thought. Draco was annoyed. He'd been really looking forward to having a few more moments alone with the Firebolt, getting the feel of it. "Harry, Harry, Harry," the girl said, looking at him as if he were an adorable, but rather dim, toddler.

"Yes?" said Draco. "Did you want something?"

"You haven't asked me out for at least two days," said the girl. "Usually you would have chased me down in the corridors or sent me an owl by now."

"I've been busy," said Draco.

"*Busy?*" said the girl in a tone that suggested no boy had ever told her he was busy before.

"It's not a quiet life, being Harry Potter," Draco went on, warming to his subject. "I've got classes, plus Quidditch, plus interviews with the Daily Prophet, loads of good to do and evil to vanquish, plus I'm being hunted down by the remorseless killer who murdered my parents. I haven't got time to go barging around after girls."

The girl was staring at him with her mouth open. She looked much less pretty that way. "If you think you're going to get me to go out with you by talking to me like that," she said, her voice tight with rage, "you're wrong, Harry Potter!"

"Fine," said Draco. "Don't go out with me. I'm really famous, I could go out with anyone."

With a scream of rage, the girl bounded to her feet and stalked away across the field. Draco watched her go, mildly grateful that she had taken his mind off the impending horror of Quidditch practice.

If Harry had known that Draco Malfoy was at that moment ruining any chance he might ever have had with Cho Chang, he might have been upset. But as he was quite asleep in the back of Lucius Malfoy's invisible carriage (Madam Pomfrey wouldn't let Lucius Disapparate with his son while the boy was unconscious), being carried rapidly across the barren and windswept moors towards Malfoy Manor, he wasn't.

On the Quidditch field, Draco discovered that he'd had nothing to worry about : he had not only inherited Harry's lousy eyesight, he had acquired his spectacular Quidditch skills as well. Draco swooped and dove on his broom, amazed how easy it was. When they had a practice game, he caught the Snitch easily, and did loop-the-loops in the air with it while Harry's Gryffindor teammates clapped and whistled. Hermione, who had come to watch him practice, cheered as well. "You're amazing, Harry!" she shouted up to him.

Draco waved at her, and then it happened: Not seeing Hermione on the field, George hit a Bludger hard at the ground. It streaked directly towards Hermione, who was too shocked to move.

Without stopping to think, Draco bent Harry's Firebolt into a spectacular dive, shooting towards the ground like a bullet. He sped towards the Bludger -- he was going so fast, he could hardly believe it -- he was level with it now, but nearly at the ground ---he was in front of the Bludger -- he jerked his broom around violently, putting himself between it and Hermione -- and it struck him hard in the stomach, knocking him off his broom and onto the ground, now only three feet away. The Firebolt clattered down on top of him.

Draco lay flat for a moment, sucking in great wheezing gasps of air. He heard the thuck-thuck of feet hitting the ground and the Gryffindor team landed and raced over to see if he was all right.

Slowly, he raised himself on his elbows -- his stomach hurt, but nothing seemed to be broken. He looked up and saw Hermione staring at him, white with shock. "Harry," she said. "You could have been killed."

He looked away from her, feeling very uncomfortable, and saw the rest of Harry's team crowded around him. George was falling all over himself to apologize, Fred was hitting George, and Elizabeth, Katie and Alicia were taking turns comforting Hermione and patting Draco on the head. Eventually, Draco managed to extricate himself enough to stand up.

"Right, then," said Fred, who was the team's captain, "go on back to the castle, Harry, you've had enough excitement."

"I'll walk him," said Hermione, jumping to her feet.

Hermione, seeming oddly nervous, talked the whole way back to the castle.

"Everyone's talking about how you scared off Goyle during Care of Magical Creatures, Harry, it was just amazing, what did you say to him?"

Draco grinned. "Nothing, I just threatened him with a little wizard dueling.... You know he's no good at that kind of thing."

"Well, you were brilliant, the look on his face! And the way he ran!"

Hermione dissolved into giggles. Draco looked over at her, and, without even pausing to ask himself what on earth he was doing, dropped his Firebolt and his Quidditch robes, grabbed Hermione, and kissed her.

For a moment, she melted into the kiss. Then her arms went as rigid as broomsticks and she shoved him away. "Harry, no!" Her eyes, huge and shocked, stared at him.

For the first time in his life, Draco found he had nothing to say.

"You shouldn't make fun of me this way," said Hermione, tears springing into her eyes. "It isn't fair."

"I'm not making fun of you!" gurgled Draco, finding his voice.

"It isn't fair," she repeated, "Harry, you're my best friend, and I know how you feel about Cho--"

"Cho?" Draco's mind was blank. "The Ravenclaw Seeker?"

Hermione stared.

"That explains why she was acting like that!" Draco exclaimed, then glanced back up at Hermione and said brightly, "Look, I'm well over *her*, Hermione. She's not even--"

"Harry!" she said warningly.

They looked at each other. Then Draco did something else he had never done before.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he said.

Her expression softened, so he added hopefully: "I've been feeling off since, uh, since Draco banged my head into the ground in Potions--"

This had been the wrong thing to say. Hermione turned her face away. "It's all right," she said in a very small voice, starting to walk again. "I know you didn't mean it."

What on earth is wrong with me, he thought, following her back towards to the castle. This Polyjuice business is affecting my mind.

They were halfway there when he saw Ron running toward them along the darkening path. "Harry!" he yelled. "I can't believe I missed Care of Magical Creatures! I heard you totally destroyed Goyle!"

"Destroyed is a little strong," Draco protested, but he was laughing as Ron steered him up the path.

"I've got to go to the library," said Hermione as they stepped inside the castle. "Sorry!" and she ran off without a backward glance.

Ron looked after her curiously. "Is she all right?"

"Just panicked about our Charms exam tomorrow, you know how she is," lied Draco, and felt an annoying little twinge of guilt as he did so.

When they got to the Gryffindor common room, Dean Thomas and Neville Longbottom gestured them over with yells of welcome. Draco wasn't in the mood, though. He pushed past them and headed upstairs, where he sat for a long time staring at the photo album full of wizard photographs of Harry's parents, who waved at him, beamed, and smiled in a way he could never remember his own parents doing.

Hermione had, in fact, gone to the library, but not to study. She needed a moment to think and be alone.

Harry had kissed her. Oughtn't she to be ecstatic, or at least pleased? She had been thrilled when he had put his arms around her, but seconds later had been swamped by a feeling of terrible wrongness the like of which she had never experienced before. That was why she had pushed him away. She knew Harry so well, she thought, knew how he looked when he woke up, how he sounded when he was tired, happy, afraid, worried; how he smelled, usually like soap and grass from the Quidditch practice field. But this time, when she'd put her arms around him, he'd smelled different....like...*pepper*?

She groaned and put her head down on the desk. Hermione, she thought, you are so *stupid*. You've been in love with Harry for years, so what if he changed his cologne?

She got up and headed downstairs to dinner.

That night, at the Gryffindor table, Draco sat between Ron and Hermione (who seemed determined to act as if nothing had happened), feeling oddly not hungry. He pushed his food around his plate with his fork and listened to them laugh and chatter. His mind buzzed with questions. Why had nobody noticed he wasn't Harry? Surely he couldn't be acting like Potter, he hated Potter, he couldn't act like him if he tried. He

just looked like Harry, so everyone assumed he was Harry, and so they liked him. Not just Gryffindors, but Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, students whose names Draco had never bothered to learn, came up and chatted with him easily. It was disorienting.

What was more disorienting was that he liked it, it was as if in taking on Harry's appearance he had taken some part of Harry into himself, and he couldn't kill it or destroy it. It just sat there in his chest, making him do things like rescue Neville's toad, save Hermione from the Bludger and....and kiss Hermione. He couldn't believe he had done that, either. Why? It must be that Harry had some kind of feelings for her, and now Draco had them. But if she knew....knew who he really was.....

Something that had been nagging at the back of his mind suddenly crystallized into a sharp and painful thought. What if Harry died? What if he never woke up? Would he, Draco Malfoy, be doomed to be Harry Potter forever?

"Harry," came Hermione's voice, "What's wrong? You look a million miles away."

Draco pushed his chair back from the table and stood up suddenly. "Got to go," he muttered, and, pushing his way past a startled Ron and Hermione, he ran out of the dining hall, through the front hall, and up the stairs to the hospital wing. He banged on the closed door until it was opened by a harassed-looking Madam Pomfrey, whose eyes widened when she saw him.

"What's wrong, Potter, are you ill?" she demanded.

"I'm here because... I need to see....Malfoy," he gasped, out of breath. "Is he still knocked out?"

Madam Pomfrey gave him a look of deep suspicion. "I suppose you might as well know," she said. "Draco Malfoy is no longer with us."

The shock nearly knocked Draco off his feet. His vision dissolved into a swirling blur of colors, and he gurgled, in a sticky sort of voice, "Is he...is he...he's not dead?"

Madam Pomfrey looked shocked. "No, Potter, of course he isn't dead!" she snapped. "Really! He's been sent home temporarily. His father came and picked him up this afternoon."

And she shut the door in Draco's face.

There was light, faint at first, sharpening to a sudden, stabbing beam. Harry groaned and rolled over, opening his eyes.

He wanted to sit up, but amazement kept him pinned to the bed. He was lying in a bedroom, but a bedroom the like of which he had never seen before. The walls were carved out of unpolished stone, and the ceiling rose so high it disappeared into shadow, despite the bright sunlight that was pouring through the arch-shaped leaded glass windows that lined the room. The huge four-poster he was lying on, canopied in

black velvet printed with silver snakes, was the only piece of furniture in the room apart from an enormous wardrobe propped against the far wall, the front of which was covered with an ornate design of gilded letter "M"s.

It was the M's that did it. Harry sat up and swore out loud, staring down at his hands -- they were not his hands --- long, pale, and unfamiliar. He touched his forehead and felt no scar. Finally, in desperation, he yanked out a handful of his hair and stared down as the silvery-white strands sifted down to the black bedclothes.

He was still Draco. And what was worse, he was - somehow - in Draco Malfoy's house. He must have been passed out cold for a long time, someone must have brought him here.

Right on cue, the door burst open, and Lucius Malfoy stood framed in the doorway. He was wearing black, as he had been wearing black every time Harry had ever seen him. Harry felt himself going cold with apprehension.

"So, boy," said Lucius, striding over towards the bed. "Do you know who you are, now?"

Harry stared at him. Surely Lucius couldn't know who he really was. If he knew he had Harry Potter in his house--

"Draco Malfoy," he said. "Your son."

Lucius' face split into a cold smile. "I told that Pomfrey woman she didn't know what she was talking about," he said, satisfied. "There's nothing wrong with you, boy. No Malfoy has ever forgotten who they are."

Harry looked into Draco's father's cold gray eyes and said nothing. His throat seemed to have closed up.

"Well, since you're here," said Mr. Malfoy, "We might as well have some fun."

He drew his cloak aside and Harry saw a long silver sword strapped to his side. His stomach plummeted. He doesn't believe I'm Draco, he thought desperately, He's going to hack me into bits.

"How about a spot of fencing practice?" Lucius Malfoy went on. "Test your mettle, boy."

Great, thought Harry, who had never even seen a fencing match. He does believe I'm Draco, and he's still going to hack me into bits.

"All, right, Father," said Harry, striving for Draco's drawling tones. Mr. Malfoy was looking impatient, so Harry swung his legs over the side of the bed and nearly yelled when his feet touched the ground - it was like ice. Mr. Malfoy didn't appear to be worried about his son freezing his toes off, however - he hurried out of the room, and Harry, still barefoot, followed.

He found himself nearly running to keep up with Lucius Malfoy as he stalked down a long corridor lined with Malfoy family portraits. There were a few hags, some very pretty women who were definitely veela - which was probably where Malfoy got his fair hair - some rather pale men who were probably vampires, and a rather unpleasant-looking wizard who was pictured riding an enormous spider whose bridle was fastened around its poison-dripping pincers. Yech, thought Harry, what a horrible lot.

Lucius Malfoy opened a huge stone-bound door with a wave of his wand and went inside, followed by Harry. He found himself in another huge room; this one had a smooth stone floor and was decorated with tapestries which depicted various scenes of wizard battle. Angry-looking wizards ran at each other, using their wands to decapitate, disembowel, and set fire to their victims. As Harry watched, mouth open in horror, a goblin with a long, flaming sword chased a screaming wizard right across one tapestry and into another.

Lucius, following Harry's gaze, nodded, looking pleased, "Yes, I just got the tapestries cleaned, the blood was starting to look quite dull and not at all shiny. Shall we begin?" And he tossed Harry a long, pointed rapier, which Harry looked at dully. "En garde!"

Harry raised his sword, resolving to bleed copiously as he died and hopefully ruin the Malfoys' nice stone flooring. Fortunately, at that moment a knock sounded on the stone door, and it swung open. A tall wizard in dark green robes strode into the room.

"Hello, McNair," said Lucius Malfoy, lowering his sword and turning away from Harry. "Did Narcissa let you up?"

"She told me you were in here, yes," said the tall man, who Harry recognized as a wizard who worked for the Department for the Disposal of Dangerous Magical Creatures. He was also, Harry recalled grimly, a Death Eater. "I came with some news--" He broke off as he saw Harry, "Hallo, Draco, I didn't know you were back home."

"His mother wanted to see him," said Lucius smoothly. "You know how women are. She misses him while he's away at school."

Madwoman, thought Harry.

"Well, the news I have actually has to do with Hogwarts," said McNair. "Lucius--"

He looked from Lucius Malfoy to Harry.

"You can say anything in front of Draco," said Lucius Malfoy. "He is entirely obedient to me."

"Of course," said McNair. "I had not meant to imply otherwise." He turned to Harry. "How goes your work at the school?" he asked. "Are you spreading the word of the Dark Lord?"

"What?" said Harry, flabbergasted. He'd known Draco was nasty, but....

"You know," said McNair, "Keeping the Dark Lord's message alive among your generation. Making sure the right sort of people get the right kind of message. Holding Death Eater meetings." He winked. "Keeping the Mudbloods down."

"Oh, yeah," said Harry, who was shaking with rage and hardly knew what he was saying, "me and the Slytherins, we all got together and had a bake sale, raised loads of money for evil, no worries there."

McNair did not seem to have heard this. "I remember when I was in Slytherin," he said. "Those were great days!" He turned to Lucius Malfoy. "So, Lucius," he said. "I wanted to talk to you about the Plan. And about Harry Potter."

Chapter Three - Narcissa Malfoy

"...And about Harry Potter."

Harry let go of the sword he was holding; it clattered to the ground with a loud bang, causing Lucius and McNair to glance over at him.

Lucius frowned. "Yes, Draco? Did you have something to add?"

With an effort, Harry forced himself to speak. "What about Harry Potter?"

Lucius looked at him hard. "Draco," he said to McNair, "talks about young Harry all the time, don't you, boy?"

This bit of information did not gratify Harry in any way.

"I - I have to play him at Quidditch," he said stiffly.

"Where, if I recall," said Lucius coldly, "he has beaten you every time."

Harry couldn't restrain a broad grin, "Yes he has!" he said.

Both Lucius and McNair stared at him; finally, to Harry's relief, Draco's father turned back to his friend. "You said you had news for me, McNair," he said. "Please tell me it's not yet another harebrained scheme to kill off the Potter boy."

McNair toed the ground. "It's a really good scheme this time, Lucius," he said. "It's really evil and cunning."

"Indeed," snarled Lucius. "And you said the same thing about the scheme to kill off Harry by sending him a poisoned birthday present at his relatives' house where, I might remind you, he is protected by Dumbledore's Familius Charm. All that happened was that his cousin Dudley wound up eating the chocolates and vomited out the window on the Death Eaters who'd come to collect Harry's body. Do you recall that, McNair? And then there was the time Nott tried to sneak into Hogwarts and abduct the boy, and was decapitated by the Whomping Willow. And when Zabini tried to send the boy an exploding broom, Dumbledore intercepted it and sent it right back in a different package. They had to bury Zabini in a *matchbox*!" yelled Lucius, waving his sword for emphasis. "More Death Eaters have been killed by stupid plots to murder Harry Potter than by Hit Wizards from the Ministry of Magic!"

Harry was astounded. He'd had no idea. Well, come to think of it, he'd thought he'd heard yells of horror from the front garden that time Dudley had been sick out the window, but he'd assumed it was nosy Mrs. Figg from next door.

"Come on Lucius," whined McNair, "just hear me out."

Lucius crossed his arms over his chest. "You have five minutes."

"It's true the boy is protected while in the care of his family," said McNair hurriedly, "and it's true he's protected at Hogwarts. We've tried before to lure him out of the castle - remember that time we sent him Arsenal tickets? --but Dumbledore's never let him go."

"And that," said Lucius, "is not going to change."

"No," said McNair, "We know that. And we've thought before of abducting someone close to the boy, so that he'd have to leave the castle to rescue them, but almost everyone dear to the boy is at Hogwarts. He loathes his Muggle family, and the Weasleys are protected by powerful charms."

Lucius was looking bored.

"But," added McNair, hastily, "that has changed. We've got someone now--someone the boy will do anything to protect."

Lucius's cold gray eyes flicked upward. "So you've got someone close to Harry Potter in your greasy little clutches?" he asked. "Who?"

Harry's stomach clenched in dread. McNair was smiling, the same unpleasant smile that he'd worn when he'd come to Hogwarts to execute Hagrid's pet hippogriff.

"Sirius Black," he said.

Draco found his way numbly back from the hospital wing to Gryffindor Tower. "Boomslang," he said dully to the Fat Lady, and stepped through the portrait hole. Out of habit, he walked over to the fire and sat down by Hermione, who was curled up on a chair with her mangy feline, and Ron, who was reading a grim-looking tome, entitled *The Art of Muggle Warfare*.

"Draco's dad came and took him back to Malfoy Manor," said Draco numbly.

"Took him where?" Ron asked, lowering his book.

"Malfoy Manor. It's where they live."

"Brilliant," said Ron, starting to read again. "With any luck they'll never bring him back."

Draco made a choked sort of noise. Hermione looked over at him in concern. "Harry," she said gently, "it's not your fault, you only hit him because he hit you first."

Draco did not reply. His mind was full of the image of his father, glaring at him. If Harry didn't play along - if he resumed his normal appearance - if Lucius Malfoy somehow found out that the boy he'd brought home was not his own son, but the famous Enemy of Lord Voldemort -- he would kill Harry. Of that, Draco had no doubt. What was it his father had told him Voldemort had said?

Whoever brings me the dead body of the boy Harry Potter will be honored above all other Death Eaters.



Ron's voice broke in on his thoughts. "This Muggle warfare stuff is really interesting," he said. "Wonder if there's any chance of getting the government to drop a what-d'you-call-it, nuclear bomb, on Malfoy Manor?"

Draco stood. "I have to go upstairs," he said, and fled, heading for the stairs to the boys' dormitory. He heard running feet behind him and turned to see Hermione, her eyes filled with alarm.

"Harry," she said, "Harry, please wait."

Draco paused and let Hermione catch up to him.

"Harry," she said tentatively, "you seem so upset, what's bothering you? It can't be Malfoy."

Draco just looked at her. All his emotions seemed to knotted up inside his stomach: the stress of playing Harry Potter for two straight days, rage, shock, pain and now terror, the terror of what horrible thing might be happening to

Harry any moment, this moment, which would surely and completely be Draco's fault when it did. He wasn't sure if he wanted to yell at Hermione or kiss her again. Both options had their appeal.

"I'm really tired, Hermione," he said. "I just want to go to bed."

"Is it what happened earlier today?" she asked. "After - after the Bludger? Because I didn't mean to be angry with you for kissing me, Harry, in fact--"

She took a step closer to Draco, her eyes full of affection.

Draco exploded. "Not everything is about you, Granger!" he yelled at the top of his voice. "Not bloody everything is about *you*!"

And he darted back down the stairs, knocking her aside, and dashed out the portrait hole.

At the mention of Sirius' name, Harry felt his knees go weak. *Show nothing*, he told himself. *Show nothing*.

"We've long known he is the boy's godfather," said McNair. "The trouble has been finding him. We've tracked him down, actually Wormtail tracked him down, and it was most ingenious of him. He remembered a cave he had gone to with Sirius as a child, when he visited the Blacks. He returned to the site and put a Binding Curse on Black -"

"Get to the point, McNair," said Lucius. "Where do I come into this?"



McNair looked disappointed. "Well," he said haltingly, "it's simple, really. Wormtail is bringing Black up from Cornwall tomorrow, and we need a place to keep him, just for a night or two, while we wait for the boy to come. We can't leave the Binding Curse on him or he'll die, and you have the best dungeons of anyone -"

"Oh, thanks," said Lucius, with heavy sarcasm. "Well, it's a stupid plan and an obvious one, but still miles better than any of your other schemes. I'll keep Black here. I've haven't seen him," he smiled coldly, "since we were at school together. It'll be like a reunion."

He and McNair laughed. Harry didn't. He felt as if he were going to be sick.

The door opened and a tall, slim blonde woman came in. She was wearing not robes, but a long, black dress with a slit up the side. Harry

recognized her immediately: she was Draco's mother.

"Narcissa," said Lucius Malfoy. "Is anything wrong?"

The woman smiled. She was very beautiful when she smiled. Harry recalled having seen her at the Quidditch World Cup and thinking that that must be where Draco got his pale, refined good looks. "I wanted to borrow Draco," she said calmly. "I haven't even seen him since you brought him home, Lucius."

Lucius Malfoy waved a hand. "Certainly, take him," he said.

Harry looked at Draco's father. He was desperate to stay and hear more about Sirius. "But, I--"

"Draco." Lucius Malfoy's voice was like ice. "Go with your mother."

Reluctantly, Harry followed Narcissa Malfoy out of the room, where he rather expected that she would try to hug him or kiss him or greet him in some way. But she

didn't. She merely turned and began walking down the corridor. Harry trotted after her, keeping his eyes open. He rather thought it would be a good idea to learn as much about the layout of Malfoy Manor as possible.

Narcissa did pause in a corridor full of portraits of what at first looked like a number of dolls in differently colored outfits. With a start, Harry realized that these were pictures of Draco as a baby and as a little boy. He stopped, grinning.

"Oh," said Narcissa smiling, "Your baby pictures. They are adorable, aren't they?"

Harry looked from one portrait in which Draco, aged about three, was wearing a pair of pink shorts and a bonnet, to another, in which he was about five and had been dressed in full Malfoy regalia, including a black cloak and long blond curls that looked extremely girly. The Draco in the picture had a mutinous expression and kept tugging at the collar of his ruffled robes.

"Yeah," said Harry, "they're adorable all right."

Narcissa then led the way down a number of twisting corridors into a huge dining room, where she gestured at Harry to sit down while she went to get him some food.

Harry seated himself at the enormous dining room table, feeling very small. The table seemed to stretch on for miles, bare except for a huge silver candelabra holding seven green candles carved in the shape of lizards. More ugly Malfoy family portraits hung on the wall. One featured a grim-looking wizard in a ruff who glared at Harry, then drew a menacing finger across his throat. On the wall hung an enormous silk tapestry bearing the Malfoy family crest, which showed a huge green snake twisting itself into the letter M, while in the foreground the figure of a hooded man snuck up behind another man and stabbed him in the back. The Latin phrase *DE GUSTIBUS NON DISPUTANDEM* wound around the feet of the attacking man. Harry had no idea what that meant. Hermione would know, but thinking about Hermione was way too painful.

Narcissa came back into the room, bearing a silver tray on which rested a teapot and cup, a jug of milk, and a plate of biscuits. "Here you go," she said, setting them down on the table. She then seated herself opposite Harry and watched him as he ate. "Madam Pomfrey says you're to eat lightly for the next day or so," she said, watching him stuff biscuits into his mouth.

"So, Mum," said Harry, wanting to fill the awkward silence, "what've you been up to?"

"I've been embroidering a blanket for you to take to school," she said eagerly, "it's got the family creed on it in gold, you're father suggested it. He thought it was time you learned it by heart. Would you like to see it?"

Harry did not want to see it at all. "Sure," he said.

She rushed out of the room and almost immediately rushed right back in again, bearing what looked like a length of green velvet. She handed it to him, and he saw that there were words picked out across the front in gold lettering:

**PUNISHMENT LEADS TO FEAR. FEAR LEADS TO OBEDIENCE.
OBEDIENCE LEADS TO FREEDOM. THEREFORE PUNISHMENT IS
FREEDOM.**

"Wow," said Harry in a lifeless voice. "It's lovely, Mum. I bet all the other kids will wish they had a blanket with a really horrible motto on it just like this one."

For a moment, Harry thought he might have gone too far; but Narcissa just smiled blankly, and Harry turned his gaze away. It was a pity he did, for it he had looked at Draco's mother's face, he would have seen her eyes were full of tears.

The double doors at the end of the hall banged open and Lucius Malfoy and McNair strode in. "Narcissa," snapped Lucius, "get McNair here a cup of tea, would you?"

Narcissa hurried to do her husband's bidding, while McNair sat down opposite Harry and grinned at him. "So, Draco," he said in a fatherly tone. "I remember when I was a Slytherin at Hogwarts, we did have some fun. I bet you're always stirring up trouble, aren't you?"

"Well," said Harry, "you know, we're kept pretty busy having Young Death Eater meetings, and then we spend a lot of time making loads of other students feel bad about their lack of money and social standing. Sometimes we stay up all night and try to raise demons to do our loathsome bidding, but most evenings we just order pizza and pull the wings off a few flies."

Harry was quite aware that he was raving, but McNair did not seem to mind. "This is quite a fine boy you have here, Lucius!" he said, turning to Draco's father. "You must be proud of him."

"He was a very unpromising baby," said Lucius Malfoy without a trace of emotion. "Weak and sickly. I told my wife that in the good old days of the Malfoys, a child like that would have been left on a windswept crag to die, but she would insist on keeping him."

McNair laughed, but Harry was fairly sure that Lucius Malfoy wasn't joking.

Narcissa came back in with the tea-tray. McNair went over to her and said, "Sorry, Narcissa, I'm going to have to take this with me. Got to go. Business." He took a cup off the tray and winked at Draco's father. "See you tomorrow, Lucius," he said, and Disapparated.

Draco sat in the darkened library, his face in his hands. His elbows were propped on an open copy of *Most Potente Potions*, which seemed ironic to him, since it was on account of Polyjuice Potion that he was in this mess in the first place.

His mind kept running down options, but none of them seemed workable. He could send an owl to his dad, explaining what had happened, in which case Lucius Malfoy would realize that the boy he had in his house was Harry Potter, and would kill him. He could work on reversing the spell, which would turn Harry back into Harry, and Lucius would see who Harry was and would still kill him. He could go down to Malfoy Manor himself and try to spring Harry, which would be a brave and spectacular move in many ways, but if his dad caught him he would think Draco was Harry and he'd wind up being murdered by his own father.

It did not occur to Draco to go to Dumbledore with his problem. He was still a *Malfoy*.

The library door opened, and a girl came in, carrying a wand. "*Lumos*," she said, and the room was suddenly bathed in light. Draco looked up, blinking.



It was Cho Chang.

"I *thought* I'd find you here," she said, sounding satisfied.

"And I thought I got rid of *you* on the Quidditch field," said Draco.

Far from seeming affronted, Cho smiled. "That was before I realized you were playing hard-to-get," she said.

"So you're back for more abuse, are you?" said Draco.
"Women."

"I was feeling guilty," said Cho, "about the way I've treated you. Telling you that you were too young for me to date and that your hair was too untidy, well, that wasn't really very fair of me."

"You've been a bad girl all right," Draco agreed. "Maybe you should go off by yourself and think about what you've done wrong. Take as much time as you need."

Cho came closer and perched on the side of the table, running her wand tip gently up and down his arm. "I know you don't mean it, Harry," she said, "You're just hurt, and I respect that."

Draco threw his hands up in disgust. "Look at you!" he said. "I bet you Harry's been running round you for years, carrying your books, sending you flowers, and all you've done is ignore him. Now here he comes along and is an absolute bastard to you, and suddenly you won't leave him alone!"

Cho stared at him. "Do you realize you're talking about yourself in the third person?" she said.

"Er," said Draco.

"Excuse me," said a voice. Draco looked up. There was someone else in the library with them. "I hope I'm not interrupting, but -"

It was Hermione.

"You are," said Cho. "Go away."

"No!" said Draco. "You're not interrupting anything." He stood up with such haste that he knocked a pile of books to the floor. "Hermione--"

Cho glanced from him, to Hermione, and back again. Then she raised an eyebrow and smiled coolly. "So that's how it is, is it?" she said. "Finally given up on me and decided to settle?"

"Harry and I are not dating!" Hermione snapped, her eyes flashing.

"Feel free to fight over me, girls," said Draco, settling back in his chair. "And perhaps a bit of hand-to-hand combat might not be amiss?"

Cho glared at him. "You really are an arrogant bastard under that whole modesty act, aren't you?" she snapped.

"Yes," said Draco. "Now go away."

Cho grabbed her wand and stormed out of the library, slamming the door behind her.

Draco turned nervously to Hermione. "She just really, really likes me," he said, shrugging. "I can't explain it." Instead of responding, Hermione strode over to where he was standing, crossed her arms, and stared at him.

Draco had never been stared at like that before. It was like she could see right through his head to the back of his skull.

"Hermione, *don't*," he protested, before he could stop himself. "Look, I'm sorry about what I said before."

"You're not," Hermione began.

Draco interrupted her. "Look, I've told you I *am* sorry, what more -"

"No," snapped Hermione, brushing this aside with an impatient wave of her hand, "I don't mean you aren't sorry. I mean you aren't - you aren't *him*."

"Aren't *what*?"

"Aren't Harry," said Hermione. "You're not Harry Potter."

Draco stared at her. He suddenly felt very tired. "Of course I'm not," he said. "I'm Draco Malfoy."

Chapter Four - The Veritas Curse

For a moment, they just stared at each other. Then Hermione lunged at Draco, who, totally unprepared for her assault, was knocked backward. He landed on the floor with Hermione on top of him, hitting him with both fists. "WHERE IS HARRY?" she screamed. "What did you do with him? Where are you keeping him? You can't have killed him, you need him to keep making Polyjuice Potion--"

"Hermione--" Draco was making not the slightest effort to protect himself as she slammed her fists into him. "I swear to you, I haven't hurt him--"

"Liar!" She grabbed him by the neck of his robes, yanked his head up, and then whacked it back into the stone floor. Draco saw stars as she fumbled in the sleeve of her robes and pulled out her wand. She aimed it at his heart. "If you hurt Harry, if you sliced off his fingers to make your horrible potion--"

"Look," said Draco, fighting to stay calm, "I did not give your speccy little boyfriend so much as a *haircut*. Although he could use one. I haven't been making Polyjuice potion. This is the same potion from Snape's class, it just never wore off."

Hermione was shaking, but her grip on the wand did not falter. "You expect me to believe that?" she said.

Draco looked at her. "My father taught me Dark magic, you know," he said.

"Don't change the subject, Malfoy."

"Put a truth spell on me," he said. "I'll show you how to do it."

"That's advanced Dark magic," said Hermione, looking very white, "Its use is strictly controlled by the Ministry--"

"Fine," Draco said, reached up, and grabbed her hand where it held the wand pointed at his heart. "*Veritas*," he said.

A jet of black light shot out of the wand and hit Draco in the chest. He had seen his father use the Truth Spell on plenty of people before but had never imagined how it might feel. Now he knew, and knew why it was considered Dark Magic - he felt as if two enormous silver hooks had been driven into his chest, just under his ribs, and was ripping it open, leaving his heart bared.

"Ask me quickly," he said, through gritted teeth. "It hurts."

Hermione stared down at him in shock, but she still had her wits about her. Quickly, she said, "Harry, is Harry all right?"

"Yes," said Draco. His voice sounded odd and strangely transparent, even to his own ears.

She blinked. "Why is it that you've taken on his appearance?"

"When we drank that potion in Snape's class, we didn't turn back when everyone else did. Harry thought I had done something to the Potion, but I hadn't. He didn't believe me --- he hit me - I hit him back and knocked him out. Then I realized that everyone thought I was him. I played along with it."

"Why?"

"I wanted to see what it would be like," said Draco. "I thought at first I was doing it so I could get the goods on Harry. Find out his secrets. Use them against him. But it didn't turn out like that." He gasped. Each word felt like it was being ripped out of him. "It was like I took some part of Harry into me with the potion. I started acting like him and I couldn't control it. I saved Neville's toad, and you from the Bludger. I feel things, now. Things I've never felt before."

"Like pity?" said Hermione, grimly.

"Yes," said Draco.

"Where is Harry?" she asked.

"When I told you that Draco Malfoy's dad had come to take him home, that was the truth. Only instead of me, he took Harry."

Hermione, being Hermione, grasped the import of this immediately and shuddered. Her grip on the wand, however, remained quite steady. "What makes you think he's all right?" she demanded.

"I can feel it," said Draco. He heard his own response with some amazement. "I didn't realize that's what it was until now.... It's like Harry's scar. He and Voldemort are connected by the curse that failed; now I'm connected to Harry by the failed spell of the Potion. I could feel it when he left the castle, that's why I went pelting upstairs during dinner. I could feel it when he woke up."

"What were you going to do?" she said. "Keep on being Harry? Someone would have caught on. I did. What was your plan?"

"Didn't have one," said Draco. "I was trying to think of a way to get to Harry."

"What do you care what happens to Harry? What do you care if he dies?"

"Look, I'm telling you," said Draco. Every word was an effort. "There's some part of Harry in me now. It makes me do things I'd never normally do. Right now I think it's fighting for self-preservation. Harry's got a really strong will, I think. There's a voice in my head that keeps saying *get to Harry, get to Harry*." He grinned, the ghost of his old nasty grin. "Cause if it was just me," he said, "I'd probably let him die."

Hermione did not rise to this bait. She was staring at him. "Why did you kiss me?" she said.

"Don't ask me that," Draco said, shutting his eyes, but it was no good, he had to answer. "You," he said, "I like you. Or Harry does. It's hard to tell."

He opened his eyes and looked at Hermione. For a moment, they gazed at each other with identical expressions of amazement. Then, a sly grin spread over her face.

"Malfoy," she said, "Have you ever had sex?"

"No," he said, and then yelled at the top of his voice, "HERMIONE, TAKE THIS SPELL OFF ME RIGHT NOW!"

"All right, all right," she said, chuckling, "*Finite incantatum!*"

The pain and the feeling of being split open vanished. Draco sucked in air, gasping; he felt like he'd just run a marathon. "Hermione," he said, not without some admiration, "that was really vicious!"

"Sorry," she said, although she didn't look the least bit sorry, "I had a bet on with Ron. And you deserve it for kissing me and making me think it was Harry." She stood up and, to his surprise, offered him a hand to help him up from the floor. "We'd better go. There are sensors all over this castle that can detect the use of Dark magic. Some teacher's probably on their way here right now."

"Oh yeah," he said, getting up, "I remember that from *Hogwarts: A History*."

Hermione stopped and stared at him. "You've read *Hogwarts: A History*?"

"Yeah," he said, "So?"

"Nothing. Let's go."

After McNair had gone, Lucius Malfoy disappeared as well, telling Harry and Narcissa that he had work to do. Harry, not wanting to hang about and make awkward conversation with Draco's mother, decided to explore the Manor and see if he could find the entrance to the dungeons. Sirius would be here tomorrow; Harry wanted to be prepared.

First he went outside and walked around the Manor, trying to get a feel for its size and shape. This turned out to be a mistake. At first, it was quite interesting, if eerily so. The Manor was huge, carved out of what almost looked like one continuous slab of black granite. He discovered a rock garden, some horse stables (empty), an extremely depressing-looking gazebo, and an enormous maze which Harry studiously avoided. (Since his fourth year at school, he had not liked mazes much.) Around back of the maze he found a small garden where the bushes were meticulously carved into the shape of animals. Magical creatures, he corrected himself: there was a hippogriff, a phoenix, a unicorn, a troll holding an axe, and a dragon, as well as some more nasty-looking creatures Harry didn't recognize.

Absently, he reached out and poked the troll-shaped bush with his finger. It was so *realistic*...

Harry yelled as the troll turned and sank its teeth into his hand. He ducked aside just as it lifted its axe and swung it at Harry's head. It might have been made out of leaves and twigs, but it made a very solid-sounding THWACK as it hit the ground, nonetheless. Harry felt into his sleeve for his wand, pulled it out, and pointed it at the troll. "*Stupefy*!" he yelled, and the troll froze in mid-movement.

Harry scrambled to his feet and dashed out of the garden. If there was one thing he prided himself on, it was his hexes, but even he wasn't sure how well a Stunning Spell would work on shrubbery.

His hand was bleeding profusely where the troll had bitten it. By the time he reached the house, the sleeve of his shirt was soaked in blood. Narcissa, who was passing through the front hallway, saw him and screamed out loud.

"Draco!" she cried, looking over at him. "What happened?" She turned his hand over, examining the wound. Serrated leaves stuck out of it like jagged teeth. "Draco, you know better than to go into the topiary garden! Your father would be so angry if -if--" she broke off, and dragged him, protesting, into the kitchen, where she bandaged his hand, first smearing it with a purple ointment that burned and stung.

"You're going to have to wear your gloves tonight, Draco," she said. "If your father--"

"Tonight?" asked Harry, in alarm, his bitten hand forgotten. "What's tonight?"

Done with the bandages, Narcissa straightened up and looked at him in surprise. "You know we have company on Saturday nights," she said. "Your father's...colleagues will be here soon."

"Er, right," said Harry. "I forgot."

He couldn't help picturing dinner at the Dursleys' with Uncle Vernon's colleagues from the drill company. He had a feeling a big Death Eater dinner would be something else again, however.

"Do I have to dress up?" he asked, without thinking.

"Draco!" Narcissa looked him squarely in the eye. "You know you have to wear the Malfoy family dress robes!"

"Right," said Harry, but Narcissa was now looking at him with grave suspicion, and he felt it was imperative he get away. "I'd better start getting dressed, then," he said, edging towards the door. "You know those dress robes...so many zippers..." With Narcissa staring after him as if he had sprouted another head, Harry backed out of the kitchen and sped down the corridor towards Draco's room.

Telling Draco to wait in the Gryffindor common room because "I know where Harry keeps his things better than you do," Hermione bolted upstairs and invaded the boys' dormitory, something she had previously done only in emergencies (and on Christmas mornings.) Dean Thomas, who had been about to get into his pajamas, yelled and fell behind his bed.

"What do you think you're doing, Hermione?" he hissed, poking his head up above the bedclothes. "You could have seen.... something."

"Dean, I didn't see anything," said Hermione. "I swear. I just ran up to get something for Harry. Give me five minutes and you can go right back to being naked in peace."

She opened Harry's trunk and tore through it, grabbing James' invisibility cloak, the Marauder's Map, and some sweaters in case it got cold. She looked around for something to stuff everything in and caught sight of Harry's school bag lying under the bed. She pulled it towards her slowly.

She had bought that bag for Harry their fifth year at school. It was an ordinary enough bag, but she'd put all sorts of spells on it: a spell so it would never tear, a spell so Harry could lock it, a spell so he could find it if he left it lying around, which he often did. She'd also sewed words onto it--not magicked them there, actually sewed them by hand: HARRY POTTER GRYFFINDOR SEEKER.

The sight of the bag recollected Harry so sharply to her memory that she choked, and a little sob escaped her before she could bite it back. She'd been running on autopilot, not thinking about Harry, because if she thought about him in danger she would fall apart completely and then she would be no use at all...

"Aw, Hermione..." Dean scuttled towards her across the floor, alarmed by the sound of her tears. Hermione wasn't a girl who cried often. "*Don't cry...*"

"Thanks, Dean," said Hermione, putting up one hand to ward him off, "and I, uh, appreciate the thought. You might want to put some pants on, that's all I'm saying, but I appreciate the thought just the same."

Hermione's dark mood did not lift when she returned to the common room and found Draco sitting in one of the overstuffed armchairs, apparently quite asleep. She stalked up to him and glared. "WAKE UP," she said.

He opened his green eyes and looked at her, "I am awake," he said.

"Fine," she said, feeling stupid. "I'm going after Harry," she went on. "I thought about taking his Firebolt, but I'm pretty sure you can't fly a broomstick off Hogwarts grounds like that. So I'm walking to Hogsmeade. There's a train at midnight that goes to Platform 9 3/4 at King's Cross Station--"

But Draco was on his feet. "You are not going without me," he said, softly but firmly. "You'll never find Malfoy Manor, it's unplotable, just like Hogwarts. And even if

you found it by some miracle, there are seventeen hexes on the front door alone, and each one requires a specific Disarming spell -"

"Malfoy," said Hermione, "I was not even thinking of going without you, so you can shut up. In fact, I was going to threaten you with the Veritas curse if you didn't agree to help me get into your horrible house."

Now it was Draco's turn to feel stupid and not let on. "Hermione, you can't do the Veritas spell," he snapped. "There's more to doing Dark magic than just saying the words."

"I wouldn't be so show-offy about my knowledge of Dark magic if I were you," Hermione said shortly. She swung Harry's bag over her shoulder and stalked toward the portrait hole. Draco hurried after her. He loathed the way she always had the last word.

Harry was sitting on the end of Draco Malfoy's bed, rubbing his eyes. He'd fallen asleep for a few moments and had a strange dream that he was half-walking, half-running down a dark road with Hermione. It had been a very vivid dream, as if he were right there beside her, and when he woke up he missed her with an ache that was nearly physical. Of course, he told himself, he missed everything about Hogwarts, not just Hermione.

He forced himself to get up and go over to the wardrobe, where he searched for the "Malfoy family dress robes." This was difficult. It appeared that Draco had a lot of clothes, from long velvet cloaks in every color of the rainbow to extremely expensive-looking Dolce and Gabbana linen shirts. His parents must have spent an absolute fortune on this lot, thought Harry, gawking. Draco's collection of designer sunglasses alone would have run about six hundred pounds. And they were *not* proper wizarding wear either, but apparently the Malfoy family's disgust for all things Muggle did not extend to Armani jackets.



"Draco!"

Harry jumped. Narcissa's voice was echoing from somewhere above his head.

"Are you ready yet? Your father's friends are already here!"

"Uh..." said Harry. "I can't find my dress robes!"

"Well, then just wear black!" she snapped.

"Okay!" he yelled, then stopped to wonder if he had to yell or if she could hear him just fine anyway. He felt immeasurably stupid. He reached into the wardrobe and was about to pull out a pair of black trousers when Narcissa's voice crackled overhead again:

"And Draco? No Muggle clothes!"

"Aaargh," said Harry, but very softly, hoping Narcissa wouldn't hear him.

"And I'm sending Anton to fetch you," she snapped, and there was a loud snap, like a switch being thrown. Harry assumed she had switched off the spell that allowed her to converse with him in his room, and began cursing quietly to himself. Who was Anton? Was he some relative that Harry would be expected to know? Still swearing to himself, he selected a black pair of satin trousers, a long ruffled shirt, and a pair of high black boots from Draco's closet and put them on. They were the most magic-y looking clothes in Draco's closet, but he felt deeply silly in them.

There was a knock on the door and Harry went to open it with a sense of deep foreboding. A tall man stood outside his door, wearing an immaculate butler's uniform and carrying what looked like a black and silver velvet cloak. He was also quite transparent.

Ah, thought Harry. A ghost servant. This was fine. Harry was used to ghosts.

"Your mother wanted me to bring you this," said Anton-the-ghost, handing Harry the cloak. It was long and looked expensive, with a big silver clasp at the throat in the shape of a snake. Harry thought he would be happy if he never saw another snake-shaped ornament in his whole life after this. "You left it in the drawing room last time you were here."

Harry stopped stock-still in the act of pulling on the cloak. What the ghost had just said had set off something like a firecracker in the back of his mind. *The drawing-room*. There was something significant about that phrase, something huge. What *was* it about the drawing-room that was important?

"I suggest, young Master Malfoy," said the ghost, "that you fasten that clasp in front of the mirror. It is complicated."

If he thought Harry's struggles with the cloak were either amusing or suspicious, he didn't show it.

Harry went over to the mirror, still pondering the question of the Malfoy drawing-room, and made a disgusted noise. If Harry had been a girl, he would have thought the reflection staring back at him was alluring and sophisticated, the white-silver of Draco's hair contrasting beautifully with the black of his cloak and the silver embroidery bringing out the gray in his eyes. But Harry was not a girl, and he merely thought that he looked like a transvestite. Ruffles! Satin! Buckled shoes! *Yech!*

They were sitting on the platform at Hogsmeade station, waiting for the train, when Draco began to laugh. Hermione twisted around to look at him. "What's funny?" she asked, frowning.

"Harry," said Draco. "He's wearing my clothes and he hates it...Hey!" he added, irritably, "I *like* that shirt. It is *not* effeminate!"

Hermione was staring at him. "Malfoy, please stop channeling Harry," she said. "It makes me sickeningly nervous." She fiddled with the strap on her bag. "Can he see what *you're* doing?" she asked finally.

"He can, a little," said Draco, "but he thinks he's just dreaming it."

"Why?"

"Harry's got a stronger will than me," said Draco neutrally. "He projects more."

"Does he..." said Hermione, now fiddling with the strap harder than ever, "does he think about me?"

Draco looked at her. His green eyes were unreadable. "Sometimes."

Hermione opened her mouth to ask more, but at that moment the train came chugging into the station. It was painted bright red and had HOGSMEADE---LONDON picked out in sparkling letters across the side. She and Draco hopped to their feet and boarded. They were the only passengers in their compartment.

"Hermione," said Draco as they settled into their seats, "How did you know I wasn't Harry?"

Hermione bit her lip. Why was he asking her this *now*? She didn't have a good answer; it would sound silly to say that he hadn't smelled right when he kissed her, not like Harry. She studied his face, but couldn't read his expression.

Maybe that's it, she thought.

"I always know what Harry's thinking," she said. "He never bothers to hide anything he feels. But when I was looking at you, it was like I was looking at his face, but Harry had gone away. I couldn't tell at all what *you* were thinking."

Draco didn't say anything to that, only stared out the window. They were leaving the heavily wooded area around Hogsmeade now and rolling into an area of dark fields dotted with small farms. A huge white moon had risen.



"Do you want to know what I'm thinking now?" he asked finally.

"No," said Hermione, "I'm sure it's really unpleasant."

She immediately regretted having said this, but was unsure how to take it back. They lapsed into silence.

Harry would never have imagined that a big gathering of Death Eaters could have been so fantastically boring, but so it was. They were a grim-looking bunch of men, even with their ugly masks off. Lucius Malfoy presided at the head of the table; Harry recognized some of the names: Crabbe and Goyle were there, just as big and ugly as their unpleasant offspring; there was Nott, Zabini, Rozier, and Franz Parkinson as well.

He had rather hoped there would be some talk about Sirius, but there was none. It seemed likely that McNair and Draco's father were the only ones who even knew about the plan. And Wormtail, of course. They probably didn't want to share the glory.

Harry sat squashed between Hugo Zabini (brother of the Zabini who had tried to send Harry an exploding broom) and Eleftheria Parpis (the only Death Eater who was not a man) an enormous-bosomed woman in black satin robes who was obviously quite taken with Lucius Malfoy: she laughed at everything he said and kept leaning across the table to give him a view of her expansive bosom. Narcissa, who was kept busy carrying trays of food in and out of the kitchen, didn't notice.

Zabini, on the other hand, was more interested in talking to Harry about all the fun he must be having as a Slytherin at Hogwarts. Harry, to whom the idea of fun now seemed a faint and distant memory, was kept quite busy inventing all sorts of activities for Draco and his Slytherin pals. "Well, we study a lot, of course," he said, "and we play with the torture instruments in the dungeon, and, uh, someone gave us a basilisk egg and we're trying to get it to hatch."

"Is that wise?" said Rozier, a tall old man with very thin eyebrows.

Harry, thrown by the fact that someone had actually paid attention to what he was saying, stammered, "Well, McNair said he'd kill it for us if it got too big."

"I, for one," said Eleftheria, "like to see children learning for themselves. That is why I sent *my* sons to Durmstrang where they have already mastered Level Five of the Dark Arts."

"Is it true they chain the Durmstrang students to glaciers for days if they do badly on their OWL's?" Harry asked with great curiosity.

"Not *overnight*," said Eleftheria, waving her fork airily.

Zabini turned to Harry, "Is Severus Snape still head of Slytherin House?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Harry.

Lucius Malfoy suddenly turned and spit on the floor. "Draco," he said between his teeth, "is quite friendly with Severus. Despite the fact that Severus betrayed us all. I have told him it is unseemly, but he does not listen."

Harry looked at his plate.

"Severus will get what is coming to him, Lucius," said Rozier in a voice that made Harry's blood run cold. "When we put the Plan into action."

Harry never thought he'd feel bad while considering the prospect of something awful happening to Snape, but he did.

"Father," he said, before he could stop himself, "I'm not feeling well. Can I be excused to my room?"

This was the wrong thing to say. Lucius turned a cold, glittering gaze on Harry, full of icy rage. When he spoke, however, his voice was even: "Certainly, Draco," he said.

Harry pushed his chair back and began to make his way from the hall. As he passed Lucius, however, Draco's father shot out a hand and grabbed his arm. His grip was cold. "You will come and see me in the drawing-room after dinner, Draco," he said quietly. "You will not be late."

"Yes," said Harry, mechanically, and, freeing his arm, he sped out of the hall.

Once away, he collapsed against a wall in the corridor, holding his head. Lucius Malfoy's voice saying the words *drawing-room* had sparked his memory, and he suddenly recalled the day four years ago when he heard Draco Malfoy telling Crabbe and Goyle that his family kept their most powerful Dark Arts objects under the drawing-room floor. At the time, Harry had thought he meant there was some kind of secret compartment under the floor. Now it occurred to him that in fact, what Draco might have meant -- and he could not be sure why he felt this, but he did -- was that the entrance to the chambers underneath Malfoy Manor was in the drawing-room. Perhaps the dungeon entrance might be there as well.

It was a slim chance, he knew, but worth investigating.

"Anton," he called softly. "Anton."

The ghost materialized before him, carrying a tea-towel and looking inquiring.

"Anton," said Harry in a whisper. "How do I get to the drawing-room? I've forgotten."

As Harry had expected, the ghost showed no surprise. "Follow me, Master Malfoy," he said, and began wafting down the corridor. He led Harry to a large room filled with overstuffed velvet chairs. The portrait of a tall woman wearing an enormous choker of rubies hung over the fireplace and a wide Persian rug covered the floor.

"Thank you, Anton," said Harry absently, and the ghost vanished.

Harry dropped to the floor and dragged the Persian carpet aside. Underneath it was the clear outline of a trap door with a looped iron handle. Harry grabbed the handle hard, and pulled.

The door lifted easily. Harry had a brief glimpse of a set of grey stone steps disappearing into darkness before his head was nearly split open by the most ear-piercing scream he had ever heard.

"MASTER LUCIUS! MASTER LUCIUS!" It was the woman in the portrait, her mouth open as she howled. "THE TRAP DOOR IS OPEN! MASTER LUCIUS! THE DRAWING-ROOM!" Harry let the trap door fall as he staggered back, hands over his ears, but even with the door closed the woman continued to scream. "*MASTER LUCIUS, COME QUICKLY!*"

On the train, Draco opened his eyes with a start. "Oh, no," he said. "Harry, you stupid prat, what have you done?"

Chapter Five - Reunion

On the train, Draco opened his eyes with a start. "Oh, no," he said. "Harry, you stupid prat, what have you done?"

Over the portrait's screams Harry could hear the sound of running feet in the corridor outside. He looked around wildly. There was only the one exit from the room and it led straight into the hallway. If only he knew how to Disapparate!

The fireplace, said a voice in his ear. Harry spun around madly; there was no one there. He didn't care, though. Dashing towards the fireplace he flung himself into it just as the drawing-room doors opened. There was a ledge at about chest height inside the flue; he climbed up onto it and braced himself there, panting.

Through a crack in the bricks, Harry saw Lucius Malfoy enter the room, followed by the Death Eaters and Narcissa. He looked angrier than Harry had ever seen him, angrier than Harry would have thought possible. His eyes scanned the room, taking in the disarrayed rug and the exposed trap door. Then his gaze fell on the portrait.

"Mona," he said. "Who did this? Who committed this outrage?"

Harry braced himself.

"A boy," said the woman in the portrait. "A boy unknown to me."

"Not -- Draco?" said Narcissa. Her expression was as set and angry as her husband's, but her eyes were darting wildly around the room, giving her a weird, almost schizophrenic look. Harry stared.

"The intruder had no Malfoy blood in him," said the portrait.

"Did he enter the dungeons?" asked Lucius.

"No," said the portrait, "He fled when I screamed."

"And where did he go?"

There was a pause. Then the portrait said, "I do not see. I only sense. I do not know where he went."

"Then you have failed in your guardianship," said Lucius in a freezing voice, and raised his wand. "*Incendium!*" he shouted.

The woman in the portrait screamed once as green flames consumed her. Then a fine drift of ash sifted to the floor.

"Lucius--" Narcissa began, but Lucius spun and glared at her. Her expression didn't change, but she turned and left the room.

One of the Death Eaters cleared his throat. "My, look at the time," he said. "Lucius, thanks for a lovely evening, regards to Narcissa." And he Disapparated.

One by one, the other Death Eaters Disapparated as well, until Lucius was left standing alone with Eleftheria Parpis. "Now, now, Lucius," she said soothingly, "It was probably just the portrait making a fuss over nothing, they do that sometimes when you ignore them. I'm sure there was no one in the house." Lucius seemed unmoved by this argument; he was still eyeing the exposed trap door. "Anyway," Eleftheria added, "at least we're alone now."

She sidled up to Lucius who, to Harry's astonishment, took her in his arms and kissed her neck. Harry was then treated to the most disgusting ten minutes of his life as Lucius Malfoy and Eleftheria snogged passionately on the loveseat. He screwed his eyes shut, but could still hear them at it; he couldn't even stick his fingers in his ears since he needed his hands to brace himself.

"Master Malfoy," said a soft voice in his ear.

Harry opened his eyes a crack and saw Anton floating suspended before him, looking tranquil. He seemed not in the least astonished to find the heir of Malfoy Manor hanging halfway up a chimney flue by his fingernails.

"Master Malfoy, might I suggest that you climb a bit higher up the flue? You will find yourself in a disused second-floor bedroom, if I am not much mistaken."

Harry nodded his thanks and began to climb. It took him about three minutes to reach the empty fireplace; he clambered through and rolled out onto a bare stone floor, coughing and retching on soot.

Draco blinked and saw Hermione staring at him with her mouth open. "What *happened?*" she said. "You said "'Harry, you stupid prat'," and then you shouted "The fireplace!"

"Did I?" said Draco, who had an odd little smile on his face.

"Did Harry fall into a fireplace?" asked Hermione. "And don't smile like that, you look like a mental patient."

"I'm not sure what happened," said Draco, "I don't see what he's seeing you know, I just get little flashes, like if he'd feeling something particularly strongly."

"So it's not like watching a movie?" asked Hermione.

"I wouldn't know, would I?" replied Draco. "I've never seen a movie."

The train started to slow down. They were pulling into a Muggle station. Looking out the window, Hermione saw a group of teenagers sitting on a bench under the florescent lights. They looked like they were returning home after some party; they were laughing and joking with each other. One of them was a tall boy with dark, untidy hair and glasses. He really didn't resemble Harry all that much, but Hermione found her throat tightening anyway.

"Is he okay?" she said, not looking at Draco.

"If he dies suddenly," said Draco, "I'll let you know."

After sneaking out of the second-floor room, Harry went to take a shower, since he was black with soot from head to toe. Then he put on Draco's pyjamas (they had fire trucks on them) and returned to his bedroom, where he found Lucius and Narcissa waiting for him.

"Boy," said Lucius the moment Harry walked in. "Where have you been?"

"I went to take a shower, Father," said Harry, who was quite glad he had left his soot-covered wet towel in the bathroom.

"Come here," said Lucius, and Harry very warily approached him. As soon as he got within grabbing distance, Lucius grabbed him by the arms and stared furiously into his face. "I'm not stupid, boy," he said with cold menace. "You've been acting peculiarly and I want to know the reason. Going into the topiary garden!" he snapped. Harry looked over at Narcissa, who looked away. "Not knowing about the family dress robes! Asking *to be excused from one of MY dinners!*" he shouted. "And if I even thought you had anything to do with that fiasco *after* dinner..."

"What your father is trying to say, Draco," said Narcissa, twisting her hands in her skirt, "is....are you taking drugs?"

Harry's mouth fell open.

"Because you can talk to us about it, if you are," she went on hurriedly. "We're, um, here to listen."

Harry looked from Narcissa, whose eyes were darting around the room again, to Lucius, whose face was so contorted with rage that it looked like a carnival mask.

"Nope," he said. "Not on drugs. Sorry!"

"Then--" Narcissa looked over at Lucius uncertainly.

"Your mother," said Lucius, who was now smiling a very unpleasant smile, "is worried that you're going mad, young Draco. There is of course madness in our

family, as we descend in nearly a direct line from Uric the Oddball, but I confess I hadn't thought about it popping up in you. Now that she mentions it, however..."

"I am NOT mad," said Harry shortly. "I got a bad bump on the head yesterday, that's all. Honestly! It's not like I've started talking to myself."

"Not yet," said Lucius shortly. Then he bent close to Harry's ear and hissed, "I sometimes ask myself what I did wrong, to be cursed with a idiot child instead of the heir I *should* have had."

Harry's irritation boiled over. "Come on!" he snapped. " Murder, torture, masses of Dark magic, what *haven't* you done wrong? You're just lucky you didn't get a son who had three heads. You must have the worst karma of anyone I've ever met!"

Lucius stared at him. Narcissa gave a little squeak.

"You must be mad, to speak to me in that manner," said Lucius. "Or perhaps you're just trying to show your mettle." He smiled, showing his sharp even teeth. "I admire that. I will not punish you."

Narcissa's shoulders sagged in relief and she turned away to hide her expression. As soon as she did, Lucius bent and whispered in Harry's ear: "If you put one toe out of line after this, my boy, it's St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies for you. They can toss you in with the Longbottoms and you can spend the rest of your life strapped to a bed, frothing at the mouth."

This mention of Neville's parents made Harry so angry he might well have forgotten himself and belted Lucius in the eye if the bedroom door hadn't opened at that moment, admitting two men in travelling cloaks. One of them was Angus McNair. The other was a short man in a dark green cloak, the hood pulled low over his eyes. From one sleeve of the cloak protruded a black-gloved hand; from the other, a shimmering hand made entirely of silver metal.

Wormtail.

"Sorry to barge in," said McNair, pushing back his hood. "Anton told us you were up here."

"Back so soon?" said Lucius.

"Yes," said Angus, a bit nervously. "The journey from Cornwall took less time than expected."

"And Sirius Black?"

Please let him have gotten away, Harry prayed silently.

"Is here," said Wormtail shortly. The last time Harry had heard his voice, he had been screaming for Voldemort to heal his severed hand. Which Voldemort had done. He

had given Wormtail a hand of metal, which now winked in the light as he raised it and pointed it towards the door, almost as if it had been a wand.

"*Everriculum!*" he shouted and a bolt of whitish light emerged from the palm of the metal hand. The light rose and expanded into the air until it was a net of silvery strands, rather like a spider's web. Then the filaments of the web broke apart, and something crashed through them, landing hard on the ground.



It was Sirius.

He was in his animal form, in the shape of a huge black dog. All his limbs were rigid, sticking straight out; only his eyes were moving, rolling back and forth between Wormtail and Lucius.

"Very impressive, Wormtail," said Lucius, but his eyes were on Sirius.

"My Master has given me a hand of great power," said Wormtail, gazing at his metal extremity with fondness. He waved it carelessly in Sirius' direction, and the black dog went skidding helplessly across the floor towards Lucius.

Narcissa gave a little scream.

"That's enough," said Lucius sharply.

"Turn him back," added McNair in a harsh voice.

Wormtail snapped his metal fingers. "*Sapiens*," he hissed, and the black dog gave a sudden twitch and was Sirius again; Sirius dressed in torn rags, with vicious cuts and scratches up and down his arms that had not been apparent when he was in his canine form. He still could not move, but his black eyes fixed on Lucius with hatred.

Harry heard Narcissa gasp. Then Lucius walked quickly across the floor and kicked Sirius in the ribs with one booted foot. Harry tried to rush forward, but tripped on the leg of Draco's pajamas and fell to the ground.

He had just begun to scramble to his feet when he was stopped in his tracks by the sight of Narcissa, who suddenly, silently, and to everyone's great surprise, had fainted dead away on the floor.

"We're here," said Draco, standing up and tapping Hermione on the shoulder. She bolted upright and stared out the window. They were at a tiny, lamplit station whose wooden signpost proclaimed it to be located in the town of CHIPPING SODBURY.

This was not exactly what she had pictured. She had rather imagined that Malfoy would come from a bleak castle perched on top of a rocky crag in the middle of a barren desert where vultures were always swooping down on anyone who didn't move fast enough. Not a cute little town called Chipping Sodbury. Still, you never knew.

"Come on," said Draco, and she followed him off the train and down onto the platform, where he turned left and walked towards the end of the platform. "Uh, Malfoy," she said, trailing after him with the bag bumping her leg, "The station's this way..."

At that moment, he made another sharp left and walked right through the concrete wall at the end of the platform.

"Blast," she said, running to the wall, "how'd he do that?"

An arm came through the wall. It was Draco's. He yanked her forward, and with a whooshing feeling, she slid through the wall and sprawled onto the ground on the other side.

"Ow," said Draco. Her bag had caught him a sharp blow to the head.

"Sorry," said Hermione, standing up and looking around with interest. They were standing at the foot of an enormous wrought-iron gate whose arch bore the inscription *Malfoy Park*. "I guess we're not in Chipping Sodbury anymore?"

"Certainly not," said Draco, starting to walk, "This is Malfoy Park, it's the village at the foot of the hill where our house is. You can get there from Chipping Sodbury, though, if you know how to go."

"You have a whole village named after you?" said Hermione, aghast.

"Yes, surprising I haven't got a big head, isn't it?" said Draco.

Hermione was about to make a sharp comment when she realized he was joking. Must loosen up there, she told herself.

They came out of the lane into a wider thoroughfare where there were shops and pubs. It was in many respects a little magical town just like Hogsmeade, but there was a difference: everything here seemed to either have the word "Malfoy" on it or be somehow related to Dark magic --- it was Knockturn Alley imagined by Lucius Malfoy. There was the Malfoy Market sandwiched between *Helga the Hag's House of Horrible Hexes* and a pub called The Cold Christmas Inn that offered a Malfoy lunch special (toasted bat sandwich.)

"They must really like you here," said Hermione, trying not to laugh.

"Ha!" said Draco. "They *hate* my family, we've been oppressing them for generations and every once in a while my dad comes down into the village and does some horrible Dark magic thing that terrifies everyone and keeps them in line."

"Doesn't that bother you?" she asked sharply, but Draco shook his head at her and whispered, "*Shhh...* The last thing we want is for anyone to see me here and tip my dad off that Harry Potter is hanging around the village."

"Right," said Hermione, who hadn't been paying attention. For some reason, when he stood this close to her, and whispered like he was doing, she got little shivers all up and down her spine.

Draco turned and began trudging up the road that led out of town. Hermione followed him. They walked on for a bit in silence; Draco seemed lost in thought. Finally, he turned right at the top of the hill, and they came out from the tree-lined road into a wide-open space. Hermione couldn't help herself, she gasped; it was *just* what she had imagined Malfoy Manor would be like. A huge spike-topped fence stretched away in either direction; directly in the center was an open gate shaped like an enormous M. Huge pillars topped by statues of writhing silver serpents flanked the gateway, and through the gate Hermione could see the looming black shape of an enormous, hulking house.

Hermione started forward; she had taken only a few steps when Draco seized her arm. "No," he said

sharply. "What did I tell you?"

"Oh," she said, feeling foolish. "Seventeen hexes. Right."

"My father invented the one on this gate," said Draco, sounding proud, "It's called the Jigsaw Hex, because if you try to go through the gate uninvited it'll chop you up into pieces."

"Your father sounds like he must be a lot of fun at parties," said Hermione.

In response, Draco took a pen out of his pocket and rolled it across the ground toward the gateway. As it passed under the arch, there was a blinding flash of green light and a sharp clanging sound. There was a pause, and then the pen rolled back to Draco, severed in two neat halves.

"So," said Hermione faintly, "one of those simple, two-piece jigsaw puzzles then."

"It's not funny," he said severely, and took out his wand. He pointed it at the gate. "*Raptus regaliter*," he said. There was another flash of light, this time blue, and Draco walked through the gate. Hermione braced herself, but he remained unscathed, so she followed.

They were now on the property of Malfoy Manor. Dark grounds stretched in every direction and she could see the luminous lights of the house in the distance.

"We can avoid most of the hexes just by skirting them," said Draco. "Here. Take my hand."

She took it.

They followed the fence for a while, then Draco pulled her behind him along a narrow path that snaked through the trees. There were occasionally loud thumping and bashing noises as if something huge was crashing through the shrubbery near them. Hermione didn't want to think about that, so she concentrated on not making noise.

They were right up against the house now. The shrubbery ended, and a narrow white path wound towards the Manor wall and then alongside. It glowed faintly in the moonlight. A high black tower rose above their heads, spangled with sequins of light where windows broke up the darkness. Draco pointed upward, to a single row of windows glowing with light. "That's my bedroom," he whispered.

"Is Harry in there?" she asked anxiously.

Draco nodded. This was a mistake, for Hermione immediately darted forward onto the glowing path. He reached out to grab her and pull her back, but his hand closed on air. He heard, rather than saw, the small metal gate opening in the base of the tower - he knew what was going to happen, of course he ought to, seeing as how he'd put the attack mechanism in place himself. He swore, ran forward, and pushed Hermione aside, hard.

There was a loud whistling noise that ended in an unpleasant thump, and Hermione heard Draco fall to the ground next to her.

She scrambled to her knees and looked around; the path was empty except for her and Draco, who was sitting on the ground, looking down at himself with an expression of surprise. The shaft of an arrow, about four inches long, was sticking out of the upper part of his thigh. Blood was spreading around the wound, darkening his jeans.

"Blast," said Draco, and then a number of other things, most of them rude. Hermione didn't blame him, though, there was a lot of blood and it looked like it probably really hurt.

She knelt down by him and put her hand on the arrow's shaft. It was strangely cold to the touch. She felt stupid tears welling up her eyes. "This is all my fault," she stammered. "And I don't have any bandages...although I could tear a piece off Harry's bag...and maybe you need a tourniquet....and oh, Draco, should you take your trousers off?"

Draco was staring at her in disbelief. "Not that I don't appreciate being asked, Hermione," he said, "I mean, some other time, sure, but right now why don't you *just think for a minute!*" He hissed the last part. "Who's the smartest witch in our class? Who's been taking Advanced-Level Medical Magic classes? Who here can fix my leg in *five seconds flat?*"

"Oh," she said, "Of course. Sorry!" She fumbled for her wand, pulled it out, and put the point against the torn and bleeding hole in his pants leg. "*Asclepio*," she said softly, and saw the lines of tension in his body relax as the wound healed, pushing out the shaft of the arrow, which fell aside. She picked up carefully; it was sticky with blood and some kind of gluey, glowing substance. She tossed it into the bushes.

"Thanks," Draco said, feeling his leg gingerly. It seemed to be fine.

"Are you okay?" she said, looking at him anxiously.

"Positively cheerful," he said, reaching up his hand for her to help him to his feet. "Now I'll have a lovely scar to show my grandchildren."

"Six inches to the left and grandchildren would have been out of the question," said Hermione. "Now there's something to be cheerful about."

Harry was indeed in Draco's bedroom; he didn't have much choice in the matter, in fact, since he was tied to the bed.

It was fortunate, in a way, that Narcissa had fainted when she did, since Harry's desperate attempts to get to Sirius had been interpreted by Lucius and the others as desperate struggles to get to *her* instead. Otherwise Lucius would most likely have been even more angry when he had tried to prevent Harry from getting past him and Harry, losing his head completely, had hit Lucius in the eye. In a fury, Lucius had thrown a Binding Hex at Harry that had wrapped around his wrists, fastening them to the bedpost. Then Lucius had magicked up a stretcher for Narcissa and stalked out of the room with her, barking at Wormtail and McNair that they should take Sirius down to the dungeons and lock him in.

Harry had been trying to squirm out of the Binding Hex for several hours now, but all he had accomplished was to wriggle partway out of his pajama top so that he was now very cold as well as being very uncomfortable *and* extremely unhappy at the thought of what might be happening to Sirius in the dungeon at that very moment. This, he thought to himself, could not possibly get any worse.

And then the window exploded.

After a whispered conference, Draco and Hermione had decided to use Lifting Spells to get themselves up to Harry's window. Draco would go first with Hermione performing the spell; if it went well, he would bring her up after him.

"Okay," said Hermione, "here we go. *Wingardium leviosa*," and she pointed her wand at Draco. He felt himself rising steadily into the air, twisting and turning a little as if he were being pulled up by a string. He saw Hermione crinkle her eyes at him in concern and he gave her a thumbs up. She gestured that he should bring her up as well, so Draco pointed his own wand and at her and whispered the words of the spell.

He was, however, not as good at that particular spell as Hermione was. Instead of rising slowly into the air she rocketed up as if she had been shot out of a cannon, too startled to scream, and crashed headlong into Draco. With nothing to brace himself, he flew backward, slamming into the Manor wall. Hermione, quite terrified, had her arms wrapped around his neck and her legs wrapped around his waist as they spun wildly in midair.

"Make it *stop*!" she hissed in his ear.

Draco just shook his head; he was trying to steady his wand. The spell seemed to still be propelling Hermione skyward; even her hair was lifting into the air as she held onto him desperately (she had her hands where no girl had handled him before, but he was in no mood to enjoy it). "*Leviosa!*" he shouted hysterically, losing his head completely, and they plunged sideways like a hanglider out of control, then flew upward again, rolled over, and shot towards the Manor with the force of a cannonball. Hermione screamed once as they plunged through the window, spraying flying glass everywhere, and crashed to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs.

For a moment, they just lay there, not moving. Hermione had her face buried in Draco's neck and was breathing in long, unsteady gasps. *I really thought we were going to die for a second there*, he thought, *I guess she did too*.

At that moment a voice spoke from above their heads; a very familiar voice. "What--?" it said. "How--?"

Draco had shut his eyes, so he felt rather than saw Hermione loosen her death-grip on his neck and sit up.

"Oh," he heard her exclaim, sounding dazed, "*Harry!*"

"W-what?" said Harry. "How?"

Harry knew he should close his mouth, but he didn't seem to be able to. Hermione, her hair dusted with bits of shattered glass, was staring at him from the floor, and while he was incredibly happy to see her, he was horribly shocked to see that she had not just her arms but her legs wrapped around....*Draco Malfoy*? A Draco Malfoy looking exactly like Harry in every particular, true, but still Draco Malfoy.

"Oh!" she said, and he thought she sounded rather guilty, "*Harry!*"

Draco had his arms around Hermione, too. His eyes were open now, and he was looking at Harry with a faintly amused expression that Harry desperately wanted to hit.

"Hello, Harry," he said. "I see you've found my pajamas. Although I usually wear the top bit as well."

Hermione burst into tears. "*Harry*," she said again, staggered to her feet, and limped over to where he was sitting. "You're *alive*!"

"I *told* you he was alive," said Draco, sounding irritated.

Hermione looked like she wanted to throw her arms around Harry, but was discomfited by the fact that he was both shirtless and tied to the bed. "Is that --?" she asked, pointing at his wrists.

"Binding Hex," said Harry shortly.

Hermione took her wand out and pointed it at Harry; "*Finite incantatum*!"

Harry's wrists dropped into his lap, and a second later Hermione had thrown her arms around him and was crying into his hair. Over her shoulder he could see Draco getting to his feet and brushing glass off his clothes. He was looking at Harry and Hermione and his eyes were very cold.

Harry put his arms around Hermione rather stiffly. For no reason that he could understand, he was feeling extremely angry with her. "Where's Ron?" he said sharply.

"Ron?" Hermione pulled away from him in confusion and rubbed her eyes.

"He's...he's back at school," she said, startled. "I left him a note."

"You left him a *note*?" said Harry disbelievingly.

Hermione opened her mouth and then shut it again. She couldn't believe Harry was being so obtuse; she also couldn't believe that practically the first words out of her mouth had been *Where's Ron?* Wasn't he happy to see her *at all*?

"Ron *hates* Draco," she said in a shaking voice. "He wouldn't have agreed to come."

"Yeah he would," said Harry.

This, Hermione had to admit, was true. "Okay, he would have, since it was for you," she said, "but I would have to have explained the whole thing to him and he would have taken forever to come around to the idea of going with Draco and it would have taken *hours*, and I thought we'd be back by morning anyway, and Harry....." Her voice broke off. "Once I found out....all I thought about was getting to you and making sure you were all right."

Harry was just looking at her with a very odd expression on his face. "Did I hear you right?" he said. "Did you just call Malfoy *Draco*?"

Draco stepped forward, putting himself between Harry and Hermione. "Look, Potter," he said sharply. "I know you don't like me. I don't like you either. I would have let my father toss you in the dungeon to die if it were up to me. But it isn't. And whether or not you believe *me*, you should at least believe *Hermione* that we are here to SAVE YOUR LIFE YOU UNGRATEFUL GIT!" Draco yelled the last part. "So let's get going!"

Harry blinked. Then he said, in a perfectly controlled voice, "I am not going with you."

Hermione and Draco gaped at him. Even Draco appeared to have nothing to say. Finally Hermione gasped, in a tiny voice, "*Why not?*"

Harry sighed. Then he explained about Sirius, about McNair's plan to trap Harry at Malfoy Manor and hand him over to Voldemort, and about Wormtail. Finally he added, "And I think there's something wrong with your mother, Malfoy."

"Ah," said Draco. "Insults. Of course."

"No," said Harry, "I mean there's something really wrong with her. She seems really unhappy and she fainted this afternoon when they brought Sirius in."

This shut Draco up.

Hermione's lips were trembling but her chin was firmly set. "That's it," she said. "We're on a rescue mission. We'll just have to get Sirius as well."

"That won't be easy," said Harry. "I tried to get into the dungeon today and it set off all sorts of alarms--"

"There's spells on all entrances to the chambers under the house," said Draco, "you have to have Malfoy blood in you to even get the doors open. We don't like strangers."

"Or anybody else," said Harry. "There's not a lot of positive energy in this house, you know that Malfoy? That's about all I've learned being here. That, and you really need a better central heating system."

"Harry, I bet you've learned a lot of helpful stuff," said Hermione placatingly. "I'm sure you--"

"It's all homework to you, isn't it Hermione?" interrupted Harry rather nastily. "Fine, then. I've learned that the Malfoys have madness in their family, which makes sense since everyone in this house is *completely* bonkers; I've learned that blondes do not have more fun; oh, and I've learned that Draco has a birthmark exactly the shape of the United Kingdom on his bum."

"I do not," said Draco.

"You do too."

"Ooh, let me see," said Hermione.

"No," said Harry and Draco together.

"What do you care, Harry, it's not even your body," Hermione pointed out reasonably.

"Well, if you behave, I might let you see Scotland."

"It's my body," said Draco sharply, "and I will not let you *exploit* it. Look at you!" he added, "poncing around shirtless, you could hardly wait to get my clothes off could you? Nice to have muscles for a change, isn't it, Potter?"

"Don't be stupid," said Harry. "You've got pipe-cleaner arms, Malfoy, and you know it." He windmilled them for emphasis. "Look! All bone!"

"BOTH OF YOU SHUT UP," said Hermione with finality. "We should be talking about *Sirius*."

"Oh," said Harry, feeling extremely guilty, "Right."

And then it happened. There was a knock on the bedroom door. They all froze, staring at one another with wide eyes and hoping that whoever it was would just go away. But as the knocking became louder and more insistent, the door began to shake on its hinges.

Harry pointed at Hermione and Draco. "You two," he hissed, "Into the wardrobe! *Now!*"

Chapter Six - The Boy Who Sulked

Hermione and Draco dived for the wardrobe and hurled themselves inside, slamming the door behind them. Harry pointed his wand feverishly at the window and whispered *Reparo!* and the smashed glass flew up and rearranged itself in the frame. Then he flung himself down on the bed and grabbed one of the bedposts just as the bedroom door, finally strained to the breaking point, burst inward and Lucius Malfoy hurtled into the room, looking livid with fury.

"Boy!" he shouted at Harry. He looked like Draco when Draco got angry: very pale with two burning red spots of color high on his cheekbones. Harry had the feeling that Lucius could have opened the door via sorcery, but had chosen to vent his ire on it instead. "Why didn't you open the door?"

"I don't know," said Harry flatly. "Maybe because you tied me to the bed?"

Lucius had the grace to look embarrassed. "I'd forgotten about that," he admitted, pointed his wand at Harry, and snapped, "*Finite incantatum!*"

Harry let his hands drop into his lap. "Thanks," he said. "How is Nar -- my mother?"

"She's fine," said Lucius curtly.

"Can I see her?"

"No," said Lucius shortly. "I need you to help me with something. I've got to go down into the dungeons and I need you to come with me."

Harry stared. This was just the invitation he had been hoping for---to be able to go and see where they were keeping Sirius-only he wasn't wild about leaving Draco and Hermione shut into the wardrobe. On the other hand, refusing Lucius Malfoy wasn't an option either. Lucius looked made enough to spit nails already.

"Okay," he said, got up, and thinking *hang in there* at the wardrobe, followed Lucius out the door.

It was pitch black in the wardrobe. One side of Hermione's face was squashed up against rough fabric, her knee was jammed against Draco's and her arm, which was pinned under Harry's bag, was going numb. She could hear Draco breathing softly next to her, and, faintly through the wardrobe door, she could hear Lucius and Harry talking. She heard Lucius tell Harry he was taking him to the dungeons, heard Harry agree; then she heard them leave the bedroom, the door closing behind them.

Draco spoke first. Actually, he didn't really speak so much as begin swearing, with great fluency and creativity, covering a wide range of topics. Both his vocabulary and his imagery impressed Hermione. It would never have occurred to her that you could *do* that with a broomstick.

"Right," she said finally. "Sorry to interrupt, I was kind of enjoying all that, but I think we should get out of the wardrobe now. My arm is killing me."

"We can't get out of the wardrobe," said Draco flatly. "It locks from the outside."

Hermione gaped at him. "What do you mean?"

Draco's voice was sharp. "What part of 'it locks from the outside' didn't you understand? Honestly. I thought you were meant to be clever."

"A simple Opening Charm--"

"No," said Draco, "this wardrobe's proof against that sort of thing. My father used to lock me in here when I misbehaved as a kid, so I should know."

"Your father sounds horrible."

"Leave my family out of this, Granger," said Draco shortly.

"*Granger?*" Hermione made a noise of exasperation. "First Harry, now you! Why are both of you acting like you hate me all of a sudden? All I did to Harry was try to save his life, and as for you, I don't know what your grievance is, but--"

"You really don't know?" Draco's voice, cold and distant, now sounded like the voice Hermione remembered from innumerable unpleasant hallway encounters at Hogwarts.

"No," she said coldly.

"*Lumos*," said Draco, and light blossomed from the tip of his wand, illuminating the interior of the wardrobe. Hermione gave a start. Talking to Draco in the dark, she had been imagining his face as she remembered it from school. And now she was face to face with Harry again. The wandlight made his green eyes glow like dark malachite. But he had Draco's angry smile.

"Potter," said Draco shortly, "is being a git for two reasons. One: he hates the idea of being rescued by me. I understand that. I would feel the same way in his position."

"And the second reason?" Hermione said curiously.

"He's jealous," said Draco.

Hermione felt as if her heart had dropped down into her stomach, then rocketed back up and lodged in her throat. "Jealous?" she said faintly. "About what?"

"Don't be dense, Hermione."

Hermione reached out and caught Draco's hand, squeezing it tightly. "What are you saying?"

Draco's hand just lay in hers, not moving. "I know what you want to hear," he said. "But is this how you want to hear it?"

Hermione paused. Was this how she wanted to hear that Harry maybe-possibly had feelings for her (or even *a* feeling -- any feeling)? From Draco's unwilling spying into the contents of Harry's head? It was a violation, even if an involuntary one. And then there was the possibility that Draco might be wrong.

She shook her head, and drew her hand out of his. "No," she said.

"Just because I can feel what Harry feels," said Draco unexpectedly, "doesn't mean I've stopped feeling what *I* feel."

Hermione stared at him. "What do *you* feel?" she asked -- and to her very great surprise, she was as interested in the answer to this question as she had been in the answer to her previous question.

But Draco had lowered his head and she couldn't see his eyes any more, just the light reflecting off Harry's glasses.

"Right now I'm feeling hungry," he said. "Very, very hungry. I haven't eaten since yesterday lunch."

"Oh," said Hermione, obscurely disappointed. She dragged Harry's bag around to where she could get at the zipper. She was now sitting next to Draco. "I brought a little food....I've got Chocolate Frogs, butterbeer, and pickles."

Draco made a face. "I said I was hungry, not pregnant."

Hermione stifled a giggle. "Well, it's all we've got."

"All right. Well, hand me a butterbeer. Maybe if I drink enough of them I won't mind being shut up in this wardrobe so much."

Harry followed Lucius Malfoy down the increasingly familiar twisted corridors of the Manor until they reached the drawing-room, where Lucius pulled the trapdoor open and gestured for Harry to come after him. Harry went, being careful not to touch anything. He didn't want his lack of Malfoy blood setting off any more alarms.

The gray stone steps led down into a cold damp darkness illuminated only by the light from Lucius' wand. It was like a maze down here: narrow passageways writhed in every direction like a bed of snakes. Harry tried to keep track of where they were going by muttering *left, right, right, sharp left*, to himself as they turned but he knew this was most likely futile.

Lucius Malfoy spoke only once, as they were passing from one narrow corridor into another, this one decorated with a mosaic of broken marble. "This will be good for your education, boy," he said.

At last they reached the entrance to the dungeon, a huge stone archway sealed off by a rusty iron gate locked by an enormous lock in the shape of two twining serpents. Lucius Malfoy put his hand on it and it popped open, allowing the gate to swing inward. Harry followed Lucius inside.

Lucius walked along the rows of barrel cells that lined the walls of the dungeon, and stopped in front of one, gazing in. Harry stopped behind him, already knowing what he would see.

The cell was a narrow room with drippy-looking stone walls and a straw-covered stone floor. On the far side of the cell was a low stone bench, on which a man was lying.

It was Sirius.

"Hallo, Black," said Lucius, and Sirius sat up. Harry was relieved to see they had taken the Body-Bind curse off him. "Comfortable?"

Sirius growled, long and low, like a dog.

"Right," said Lucius. "It's nice to see that you're proud of the fact you've been an Animagus so long you can no longer speak like a human being."

Sirius turned his head away.

Lucius shook his head in disgust, glanced down, and pulled up the left sleeve of his robe, baring his arm, on which the black skull-and-serpent design of the Dark Mark stood out as clearly as a tattoo. Then he raised it to his face as spoke into it, rather as if it had been a walkie-talkie. "McNair," he barked. "Peter. Where are you?"

The skull on Lucius' arm moved its jaws, and a tinny voice emerged. "We cannot get into the dungeons without you," it said. "We need someone to open the trap door."

"Damn," snapped Lucius. He glanced down at Harry. "Have you got your wand, boy?"

"Yes," said Harry, taking it out and showing it to Lucius.

"Very good, Draco," said Lucius, showing his pointed teeth in a smile. "I'd like you to watch Black until I return with Peter and McNair. If he moves, put the Leg-Locker curse on him. You are old enough to take some responsibility now," he added. "It's time for us to see what you're made of."

Harry suspected this had less to do with giving Draco an opportunity to show what he was made of than the fact that Lucius needed some help and Narcissa was in no shape

to pitch in. He was not about to complain, however. "Right, Father," he said. "I'll be here."

Lucius left, leaving Harry standing there in the dark, twitching with impatience. As soon as he heard the gate shut behind Lucius in the distance, he darted up to the bars and called, "Sirius! Sirius, don't be scared, it's *me*--"

Sirius raised his head. "Harry," he said. "What have you done to your hair? It looks awful."

Harry choked in surprise. "You *recognize* me?"

Sirius chuckled. "I'm a dog, Harry," he said. "I can recognize your scent faster than your appearance. I've known you were here since I got here."

Harry rested his head against the bars of the cell. It was a relief to have someone recognize him, even if it was because of the way he smelled.

"Disguising yourself as Lucius Malfoy's son was awfully risky, though," said Sirius disapprovingly. "What did you use? Polyjuice Potion?"

"Sort of," said Harry, and in a rush, he filled Sirius in as quickly as he possibly could on everything that had occurred in the past few days. Sirius listened in silence, occasionally nodding or making an exclamation of surprise, until Harry got to the part where Wormtail and McNair had brought Sirius into Draco's bedroom and Narcissa had promptly fainted.

"Narcissa," said Sirius meditatively. "Now there's a mystery."

"What?"

"Narcissa Hardesty," said Sirius, "was the most beautiful girl in her year at Hogwarts. She was two years older than James and Lily and the rest of us, she was a very good student, and she was very popular. And then, in her last year, she got engaged to the slimy git, Lucius Malfoy. No one could understand it. It was the mystery of the year, she'd never been able to stand him before, and he was much older than she was."

Harry gave Sirius a hard look. It was difficult to tell under all the mud and blood and grime, but he thought Sirius was looking a mite shiftier.

"Did you fancy her, Sirius?" he demanded.

"I might have," Sirius admitted. "I knew her quite well, Harry. She was a good person, I would have bet anything on that -- but then I would have said the same about Peter, and look what happened with *him*."

"So are you saying I should --" Harry began, but Sirius interrupted him.

"Just keep an eye on her, Harry, that's all I'm saying."

"Forget her, Sirius," said Harry, "the whole point is that we need to get you out of here."

Sirius shook his head. "Not now," he said. "Malfoy will be back any second."

"I know that," said Harry. "I was thinking of coming back down here later tonight. I've got my dad's cloak in my bag upstairs. It'll fit over all of us. I'd leave Draco behind," he added darkly, "but I need him to open the doors. They only open for Malfoys."

Sirius raised his right hand to run it through his hair then, and Harry saw that his left wrist was shackled to the bench on which he sat. "Harry," he said. "I know you don't like the Malfoy boy, but be sure he wears the invisibility cloak, okay? Because if they catch him, they'll think he's you. And that'll be the end of him."

Harry's throat was dry. "They're planning on killing me, aren't they, Sirius?"

"Worse," Sirius said grimly. "I heard McNair and Wormtail talking about it on the way here. Their plan was to try to use me to lure you to Malfoy Manor, and when they trapped you, to summon Voldemort. He wants to use the Lacertus Curse on you--"

Sirius broke off. The unmistakable sound of the dungeon gate creaking open was plainly audible through the walls. Harry backed away from the bars, and stood with his wand out as Lucius, McNair, and Wormtail came into the dungeon.

They ignored Sirius. Lucius nodded once, curtly, at Draco. "Stay here, boy," he said. "I want you to watch this."

Harry tightened his hands into fists. He knew they weren't going to hurt Sirius -- a dead hostage was no hostage -- but he didn't like the sound of this.

Lucius had taken out his wand and was holding it in front of him. McNair took out his own wand, and touched the tip to Lucius'; then Wormtail raised his hand and put it on top of both wands. "*Dominus vocare*," he said in his hissing, squeaky voice.

A jet of green light flowed from the wands' tips, and from Wormtail's hand. It coalesced into the shape of a head and a pair of shoulders. The face was blurred and indistinct, but Harry knew it at once--there was no other face like it, flat and evil, with slitted cat eyes.

Voldemort.

"Master," said Lucius in an unctuous, ingratiating voice.

"Why have you summoned me?" said the image of Voldemort in a harsh, smoky voice.

"We wished to show you that we have succeeded in capturing Sirius Black," said Wormtail, grinning all over his fat little face. "Do you see him there?"

The image of Voldemort turned its head towards the cell that held Sirius. As it did so, its gaze swept over Harry and he felt the familiar stabbing pain in his forehead. He dug his nails into his palms, but didn't move.

"I see him," said the Voldemort-image. "And the boy Harry Potter? Has he been notified?"

"I sent an owl to his school, Master," said McNair.

"Well then," said Voldemort. "You have done good work. You shall be rewarded," and, as they all smiled, he added sharply, "*when* you have the boy in your custody, that is."

Their smiles faded slightly. "That will be soon, Master," said Lucius.

But Voldemort was looking at Harry again, and the pain in Harry's forehead was increasing. "Is that your son, Lucius?"

"Yes, it is."

Voldemort's gaze did not waver. "He has the look of you, Lucius," he said finally. "When he is old enough, you will bring him to me?"

"Of course, Master."

At that, the image of Voldemort vanished. Apparently he was not one for extended good-byes. Which was just as well in Harry's opinion--in another second, he was sure, the pain in his scar would have driven him to his knees.

And yet, he was glad of the pain. At least it meant he was still himself -- underneath the disguise, he was still Harry Potter.

Lucius, however, seemed pleased, or as pleased as he ever seemed. He even put a hand on Harry's shoulder as they left the dungeon. Harry twisted around to try to get a glimpse of Sirius as they went through the gate -- but Sirius had turned to face the wall, and didn't see him.

Draco had now drunk four butterbeers and Hermione had had four. A short and very giggly fight had broken out over who got to drink the last one. Draco had won. The alcohol content in a single butterbeer was quite low, but having drunk four of them on an empty stomach had made Hermione feel drowsy and lightheaded.

"What if your speccy little boyfriend never comes back?" said Draco gloomily. "It would be very embarrassing for me to die trapped in my own closet."

"He's not my boyfriend," said Hermione automatically. "And he'll come back."

Draco looked at her hard over his butterbeer. "Why?" he said.

"Because Harry wouldn't leave us here to die," said Hermione, startled. "He might be annoyed at me, but he isn't *homicidal*, now is he?"

"No," said Draco, "I meant, why isn't he your boyfriend?"

Hermione discovered she was having a bit of trouble focusing her eyes on Draco. Of course, it was about four in the morning and she hadn't slept in twenty hours.

"Because," she said glumly, "he doesn't like me that way. He said so."

"Stupid git," said Draco, matter-of-factly, "I don't think he knows what he wants."

"What's he feeling now?" asked Hermione, despite herself.

Draco thought for a moment. "Sad," he said.

"You know what I'm really going to miss?" said Hermione, who was feeling an odd drifting sensation now, rather as if she were falling asleep without being tired.

"Being surrounded by all this Armani?" suggested Draco.

"No," said Hermione, "You. Being like this. When we take the spell off you and Harry, you'll go right back to being nasty and horrible, won't you?"

"On the plus side," said Draco, trying to sound light, "Harry will probably stop being such a jerk."

"Don't call him that," said Hermione, but her protest was more automatic than truly felt.

"You know what I'm going to miss?" said Draco, and now he wasn't looking at her, but staring fixedly at a spot above her head.

"What?"

"Having you for a friend," he said, very quickly. "I mean, even back when you thought I was Harry, it was pretty good... I've got friends, you know, like Crabbe and Goyle, but I never get the feeling that they'd die for me. Well, they might die *of* me, like if I told them to eat poison they probably would, but that's more stupidity than loyalty, in my opinion." He sighed. "But you'd die for Harry, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah," said Hermione. "Although I think I might die *of* him as well," she added, and Draco grinned crookedly. Hermione leaned sideways so that she was now resting the back of her head on his shoulder. He was sitting very still; she could see the line of his profile, looking very serious and familiar in the light from the wand. "I'll be sorry when you start shaving," she said dreamily (she was quite lightheaded now), "I love that translucent quality your skin has, I always have. And when you rip that first razor through your stubble, that'll go with it forever."

She tilted her head up and kissed him on the cheek.

He looked down at her. His eyes were inches from hers. "Hermione," he said, "Who are you talking to?"

"I don't know," she said, and this time she kissed him on the mouth.

Whatever misgivings he might have had, they didn't show. He caught her by the shoulders and kissed her back fiercely, and any half-thought she might have had that it was Harry she was kissing vanished, she had never kissed Harry but she knew that if she did it wouldn't be like *this*. This was kissing a stranger, or a near-stranger; every touch of his lips on hers sent bolts of fearful excitement zinging through her nerve endings. He didn't smell like Harry either, he smelled like Draco: lime juice, pepper, cold night air.

But when he said her name, it was in Harry's voice.

She didn't care. They rolled over and over, kissing in the cramped confines of the wardrobe, banging off the sides, so preoccupied that neither of them noticed that someone was opening the wardrobe door and letting in the light from outside, so preoccupied they didn't stop until a voice spoke and shattered their absorption with a sharp and furious finality:

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?" said Harry.

Hermione was quite miserable. Harry wasn't speaking to her, and it looked like he might well have decided never to speak to her again. Oddly enough, he was still talking to Draco, although not with what could be termed great enthusiasm.

Draco and Hermione had sprung apart violently the moment they had recognized Harry's presence, but it had been way too late. Hermione had stumbled out of the wardrobe, half-hysterical and very sticky from butterbeer and kissing, and tried to take Harry's arm, but he had only looked down at her hand as if it was a Blast-Ended Skrewt that had landed on his sleeve, and said : "Don't. Touch. Me." in a very flat, very cold, and very final voice. Then he said, "Come on out of the closet, Malfoy. I need to talk to you."

Draco had crawled out of the closet looking apprehensive, apparently certain that Harry was going to throw a punch at him, but Harry hadn't. Harry seemed convinced that the person who was at fault here was Hermione, who was now perched miserably on the end of Draco's bed, watching the two boys craft a plan to get Sirius out of the dungeons.

"We'll both have to go," Harry was saying flatly. He had explained Sirius' situation, now he and Draco had their heads bent over a sketchy map Harry had drawn of the Manor and its underground passages. "You have to let me in down there, because I need someone with Malfoy blood to open the doors. We could both fit under the invisibility cloak, but it's probably easier if you wear it and I go a little after you. If doors start popping open all over the place with no one operating them, questions

might be asked. And stay under the cloak--you're Public Enemy Number One around here, the way you look."

Draco nodded. "It's better if we go soon," he said, "pretty soon they'll be expecting Harry Potter to show up and if you don't..."

"Yeah," said Harry shortly. "I was thinking we'd go right now."

"Good plan," said Draco. "What about Hermione?"

Harry gave Hermione a long, cold, unfriendly look. "Let's lock her in the wardrobe," he suggested.

"I'm not staying in the wardrobe," said Hermione flatly. "I'm coming with you."

"No, you aren't," said Harry, not looking at her. "It's going to be risky, and I can't be constantly worried that you're going to do something stupid and jeopardize your safety."

"You know perfectly well that I don't do stupid things," said Hermione, furious

"I think you've just proved that you do," said Harry, taking no trouble to conceal his contempt.

Without pausing to consider what she was doing, Hermione took five quick steps towards Harry and hit him hard across the face. The map fell out of his hands and he stared at her, looking as astonished as if his wand had jumped out of his pocket and started singing the national anthem.

Draco was grinning. "You might want to sit down, Harry," he said. "The last time she did that to me I saw stars for days."

Harry and Hermione turned on Draco simultaneously. "Shut up, Malfoy!"

"Fine, then," said Draco. "I'll just go sit over here." And he stalked off towards the far end of the room. He sounded resentful, but Hermione had a feeling he was eager to get away and let them go on with their argument in peace.

"I'm not going to apologize," she said to Harry in an icy tone. "You deserved it."

"Yeah." Harry, still looking quite shocked, took Draco's advice and sat down on the end of the bed. "I guess it isn't any of my business."

He looked so miserable, Hermione felt guilty. "Harry....I know what you must be thinking....."

"Oh, no you don't."

"I know you don't like Draco--"

"Don't *like* him?" Harry sounded as though she had just told him she was going out to dinner with Voldemort. "This is Draco Malfoy, Hermione, you do realize this is *Draco Malfoy* we're talking about here? The one who tried to get Hagrid sent to Azkaban about a million times? The one who calls you a Mudblood? The one whose father got Ron's dad fired from the Ministry of Magic?"

"I didn't know about that!" said Draco's voice from across the room.

"Shut up!" said Harry, not taking his eyes off Hermione's face. "The Draco Malfoy who said he wished you were dead? Do you remember *that*, Hermione?"

"He's different now," she protested, knowing how stupid this sounded. "He's changed."

"*Changed?*" repeated Harry, now sounding as if she had just told him she was going out to dinner with Voldemort *and* bringing a nice bottle of wine. "What would Ron say, if he knew you were making out in a closet with the guy whose father took his dad's job away and practically bankrupted his whole family? If it wasn't for Fred and George's joke shop they'd be out on the street and you know it!"

"That's not fair," said Hermione, stung by this mention of Ron. "That was Lucius, not Draco. I don't blame you for what the Dursleys do, now do I?" She dropped her voice to a whisper. "Harry..." she said again, "he's different now. When we were trying to get into the house from outside, he jumped in front of an arrow that was aimed at me. He saved my life. Doesn't that mean anything?"

Harry looked at her. Her brown eyes were huge in her white face and her lips were trembling. "It's the Polyjuice spell, Hermione," he said. "You know that. You sound like *Hagrid*, adopting some horrible monster and insisting it's well-behaved. One of these days, he'll bite your hand off. Either when we take the spell off him or before."

"How do you know it's the spell, Harry?" said Hermione, casting an anxious glance across the room at Draco.

"Because," he said, paused, and looked up at her. She could tell he was trying to decide whether or not to tell her something. "Because I can feel the opposite happening in me, all right?"

"You mean....you can hear what he's thinking?"

He shook his head. "No. Something else." He took his wand out of his pocket and beckoned her to come closer to him. "Watch this, Hermione," he said, and pointed the wand at a pair of spiders who were scuttling across a gap in the flagstones.

"*Cruoris!*" he hissed.

A jet of black light shot out of his wand tip and hit one of the spiders. Instantly, it turned and savagely attacked its companion, biting off its head and proceeding to devour it. Harry watched the carnage with a grim look on his face.

Hermione felt her eyes widen. "Harry," she said, dismayed, "that was....Dark magic, wasn't it?"

"That wasn't even that nasty of a spell," said Harry woodenly, watching the remaining spider, which was now much fatter than it had been, scurry away across the floor. "Most of them are loads nastier."

"But you've never done Dark magic in your life," said Hermione, shocked. "And it needs masses of practice..."

"I haven't," said Harry, "but *he* has," and he jerked his head toward Draco. "Now do you see?"

"Oh, Harry...." she said, and sat down next to him on the bed. She could see how miserable he was and she felt like her own heart was being shredded. She had promised herself she wouldn't feel guilty about kissing Draco in the wardrobe, but now she did. It didn't make sense, she owed Harry nothing, he probably didn't even like her that way, but there it was and nothing to be done about it. Silently promising herself she would never kiss Draco again, she said fiercely, "We will get out of this, Harry. We will get Sirius out of the dungeon, and we'll get the spell off you, and everything will be back like it was before."

"What good am I going to be to Sirius like this?" said Harry bleakly. "What if I suddenly go all mad and evil? And what if the spell won't ever come off?"

"Then we can take it up with the Ministry when this is all over," said Draco, who had come back over to their side of the room and was gazing at Harry in irritation. "Would you stop with the self-pity, Potter? You're not going to go all mad and evil, you've got a bit of me in you, not a bit of Voldemort."

"Same difference," said Harry, staring at the floor.

"Right," said Draco. "Tell me: when did the Boy Who Lived become The Boy Who Sulked?"

"Oh, very funny," said Harry. "Too bad none of the Slytherins are here to appreciate you, Malfoy."

"I didn't choose to have Wonder Twin powers with you, either, but I'm not lying about whinging on and on," said Draco shortly.

"No," said Harry, with heavy sarcasm, "your method of solving the problem by snogging Hermione every chance you get is working wonders. You deal with crises in your way, Malfoy, I'll deal with them in mine."

"My way is more fun," Draco pointed out.

"Your way," said Harry, "is going to get your head kicked in."

"Now that's me talking, that is," said Draco, sounding pleased. "I recognize the bad temper."

Harry didn't look like he even had the energy to tell Draco, who was smiling to himself, to shut up. He glared at him, stood up, grabbed the map, and said, "If we're going to go, we should go now."

They went, Draco grabbing up the invisibility cloak and Hermione taking her wand, which had fallen inside the wardrobe during all the confusion. As they walked toward the door, Harry passed Draco and hissed under his breath, so Hermione wouldn't hear him, "She only likes you because you look like *me*."

Draco stopped smiling.

The first part of the plan went remarkably well. Draco, in his invisibility cloak, went into the drawing room, checked that no one was around, and opened up the trap door for Harry and Hermione. They scrambled down the stairs and Draco followed after them.

Using a combination of Draco's memories of the underground passages and Harry's incomplete map, they made their way slowly downward through the tunnels. Hermione was amazed at how huge they were. They passed underground rooms the size of tennis courts, some with sparkling jewelry-like stalactites hanging down from the ceiling.

"There are more rooms under your house than *in* your house, Draco," she said.

"I know," said Draco's disembodied voice off to her left, "The Manor is only about six hundred years old, but these passages have been here for a millennium at least. My mother says she reckons it once was some sort of underground city."

"Did you know your mother went to school with my parents?" said Harry, who still wasn't looking very friendly, but seemed resigned to the situation.

"I knew she went to Hogwarts, yeah."

"She used to be friends with Sirius," said Harry.

Draco's voice was flat. He didn't sound like he wanted to talk about his mother. "She's never mentioned him."

Hermione trailed along after them. She was brooding on what had transpired between her and Draco in the wardrobe. She wondered if Draco was thinking about it as well. It was a bit hard to tell, due to his current invisible state.

It wasn't the first time she had ever kissed anyone. She had kissed Ron a couple times during fifth year, but nothing had ever come of it, every time their lips had met Ron had panicked and run away, then ignored her for several days thereafter. This had

swiftly begun to grate on Hermione's nerves and she had announced that they would just be friends from then on, which was a huge relief to both of them.

Then there had been Viktor. Hermione grinned to herself. Poor Viktor. She had never really liked him all that much, although she had allowed him to kiss her on several unmemorable occasions. She had mostly paid attention to him in hopes that it would make Harry jealous, which it hadn't. Harry, as usual, seemed to be able to see right through her and could tell without trying that she wasn't really interested in Viktor at all.

She remembered how happy she had been right before the second task of the Triwizard Tournament, when they had told her she was going to be a hostage for one of the champions -- the "thing the champion would most miss." She'd assumed it would be Harry whose hostage she would be. The memory of how disappointed she'd been when it had turned out to be Viktor wiped the grin off her face.

"We're here," said Draco, somewhere off to her right. "Hold on."

They were at the dungeon entrance, now tightly barred and locked with the snake-shaped lock. There was some rustling as Draco went up and presumably did whatever it was he had to do to get the lock open. It fell to the side, and the gate squeaked open.

Harry took her hand as they went through the gate and she gripped it tightly. It was creepy down here, and the dungeon itself was very dark. Harry pulled her forward, and behind her, faintly, she could hear Draco following them.

Harry dropped to his knees before a row of bars, and Hermione dropped down next to him. "Sirius," said Harry in a whisper. "Sirius, are you awake?"

There was no answer. "*Sirius*," repeated Harry, more urgently now.

A tiny light blossomed like a firefly in the pitch darkness of the cell. As it bloomed outward, Hermione realized it was the light from a wand. It expanded to illuminate the cell, showing the bare, straw-covered floor, the dank walls, and Lucius Malfoy and Wormtail, sitting together on the stone bench on which Sirius had been lying an hour before. Lucius, holding the glowing wand in his right hand, was staring at Harry with an expression of dawning rage.

"Draco," he said through his teeth. "*What are you doing here?*"

Behind her Hermione heard the real Draco gasp in audible shock. But Harry was too stunned to speak. His eyes darted wildly from Lucius, to the bare stone bench where he had last seen Sirius, and back again to Draco's father.

Hermione realized that if anyone was going to do anything, it would have to be her. She stood up suddenly, letting go of Harry's hand as she did so. "Mister Malfoy," she said. "This is all my fault."

Lucius' gaze flicked to her and she saw disbelief written across his face. "And who," he said, with some difficulty, "are *you*?"

"I'm Draco's girlfriend," she said. "I'm...Mandy Brocklehurst."

She bit her lip and sent out a silent apology to Mandy, whose name she had picked because the Brocklehursts were an old and well-respected wizarding family, a fact Lucius Malfoy would be sure to know.

Harry, who was goggling at her in the manner of a stuffed frog, tried to grab her ankle warningly. She stomped on his hand.

"Draco and I were having an argument," she said, batting her eyelashes at Lucius. "He said your family had the biggest dungeons in Britian, and I said that the Rookwoods did, and, well...." She glanced down. "I *made* him take me down here. It's all my fault!"

And she burst into tears, which was not hard to do since the situation was already so stressful. As she had expected, Lucius Malfoy, while perfectly at ease with all sorts of torture and nasty Dark magic, was unprepared for the spectacle of a crying teenage girl. He looked deeply shaken.

"Stop that," he said to Hermione. "How did you get here, anyway?"

"Floo Powder," said Hermione, and cried harder than ever. "I just missed Draco so much when he wasn't at school....And I wanted to see Sirius Black, because he's one of the most feared wizards in England, and I just couldn't believe you had captured him, Mister Malfoy....oh, I never knew Draco's father was such a great wizard...."

This perked Lucius up. "Well," he said. "No harm done, I suppose, especially as Black is no longer even here. We have moved him to another cell."

Hermione peeked at him through her fingers, hoping he might drop a bit more information, but he seemed disinclined to do so.

"I must say," Lucius added, looking at Harry now, "I'm relieved to see you have a girlfriend, Draco. I was beginning to think you were going to turn out to be gay."

There was a stifled sound from behind Hermione as the real Draco spluttered indignantly.

"Um," said Harry. "Right. Well, I'm not. Although I can see why you thought so," he added. "All those frilly clothes..."

He broke off as Draco stomped an invisible foot down on his ankle.

"And she's quite pretty, too," said Lucius, who was now looking at Hermione again. It was not a look she liked. "Why don't we all go back upstairs and get.... a little better acquainted?" He turned to Wormtail. "Peter, you stay with the prisoner in the other room until *he* gets here."

Wormtail nodded. He was looking at Hermione with a confused expression on his face. With a sick swoop in her stomach, Hermione realized that he was probably

wondering where he had seen her before. Because the truth was, he *had* seen her before --with Harry. Of course, she had been thirteen then and she was sixteen now, and there are no greater changes that take place in a girl's appearance than those which take place between thirteen and sixteen -- she was at least a foot taller now, had managed to tame if not straighten her hair, and of course her teeth were different, and her figure....yuck, she hoped Wormtail wasn't looking at her figure.

"In the meantime," said Lucius, "Amanda and I will go upstairs and talk. Draco, get up off the floor. You may come with us if you wish."

And he swept out of the cell, taking Hermione's arm as he did so and propelling her forcefully upstairs. A very upset-looking Harry followed behind them.

Chapter Seven - Draco Malfoy's Girlfriend



Hermione sat across from Lucius in his study. It was a room she would have liked under other circumstances, since it was lined floor to ceiling with books. Stained glass windows glimmered in green and cobalt, depicting various Malfoys dressed as sorcerers and warriors. A fire was roaring in the grate, and Lucius had pulled up two overstuffed chairs by the blaze, one for himself, one for Hermione.

There was nowhere for Harry to sit, so he stood next to Hermione's chair.

"So, Amanda," Lucius was saying. He had his fingers templed under his chin and was smiling, showing all his pointed teeth. Hermione thought she liked it better when he was looking pissed off. "How did you meet my son? I'm interested in what a beautiful girl like you might see in Draco."

What a *weasel* this man is, Hermione thought furiously. "Loads of girls like Draco," she said blandly. "He's very popular."

"Are you in Slytherin as well?" asked Lucius.

"No," said Hermione quickly, both because she was revolted by the idea that she might be in Slytherin, and because she was afraid that if she said she was, Lucius might wonder why Draco hadn't mentioned her once in the past six years. "I'm in Ravenclaw."

"Then you must be very clever," said Lucius.

Hermione didn't know what to say to this, so she said nothing. Harry cleared his throat. "She's one of the top students in our class, Father," he said.

Lucius' eyes flicked to Harry, then back to Hermione. It was as if Harry wasn't there. "I'm glad you're here, Amanda," said Lucius, "You've picked an auspicious time to visit. Great things are happening at Malfoy Manor. In fact, a number of my friends are arriving this afternoon and I was planning a small reception. Can I assume that you will attend?" His eyes rested momentarily on Harry. "As Draco's...date?"

Lucius said "date" as if it were a word he hadn't said in thirty years.

"I don't...have anything....to wear," said Hermione, goggling in surprise.

Lucius' eyes ran over Hermione -- from her worn jeans and T-shirt, to her hair, which was starting to frizz up at the ends (it had been a while since she'd remembered to use her Hair-Straightening Potion), and her beaten-up boots. "You are small and slender," he said, and now she *definitely* didn't like the look on his face. Harry's hand suddenly came down hard on her shoulder, and squeezed. "Like my wife," added Lucius blandly. "I am sure she can lend you something. Draco!"

"Yes?" said Harry, who had the bright red spots on his cheekbones now that Draco always got when he was angry. "What?"

"Go find your mother," said Lucius. "Ask her if she can bring up a dress for your young friend here. I think she would look lovely in something....Amanda."



Lucius smiled. Clearly he found himself amusing. It was apparent that Harry did not agree. He looked wildly from Lucius to Hermione, who gave him a desperate smile. *Go*, she mouthed. *I'll be fine.*

"All right," said Harry. He turned to go, then turned quickly back, bent down, and said in Hermione's ear -- loud enough for Lucius to hear him-- "I'll be right back, darling."

"Of course you will," she said faintly.

Her eyes met Harry's. His were full of anxiety, anger, and something else. Without warning, he leaned forward and kissed her on the mouth.

It was a quick and thorough kiss, over almost before Hermione had a chance to realize what was happening. She closed her eyes and leaned into the kiss, but Harry had already pulled away. For a split second, he looked into her eyes, and she could have sworn that she was looking into Harry's green eyes and not Draco's gray ones....he was so very *Harry* in that moment.

Then he stood up and glared at Lucius. "I'll be right back," he said again, turned and left the room.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Hermione's heart fell. She had always felt she could face anything as long as she was with Harry....even with Draco, it had been all right, since he *looked* like Harry....but facing Lucius Malfoy alone made her sick to her stomach.

"So, Amanda," Lucius said, grinning all over his pale, pointy face. "You never did tell me how you met Draco."

"Quidditch!" she said quickly. "You know he's Seeker for Slytherin, and they were playing Gryffindor and won, and after the game I went up and congratulated him on beating Harry Potter. So he asked me out."

Lucius' eyes flashed at the mention of Harry's name. "You know the Potter boy?"

"Everyone knows Harry Potter," said Hermione with complete honesty.

"Is he a friend of yours?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "No," she said. And it hurt, somehow, to say that she wasn't Harry's friend, even if it was a lie. "He's horrible to Draco. So I don't like him." She took another deep breath. "And he is the Enemy, isn't he?"

Now Lucius' smile widened. "I was right to call you clever," he said. "So you're on our side?"

"Oh, yes. Draco's explained everything to me and it all makes sense. When -- when the Plan is put into action, those who are loyal will be rewarded."

"That's right. And are you one of the loyal ones...Amanda?"

"I'm loyal to Draco," she said stoutly.

"Are you?" he said meditatively. "Come here for a moment, my dear. I want to show you something." He stood up and went to the bookshelves, and Hermione followed. He took down a fat green book called *Epicyclical Elaborations of Sorcery* and opened it, flipping through the pages. "Have you seen this book before?" he asked.

"No," said Hermione, who had a strong feeling that if she had looked for this book in the Hogwarts library, she would have found it in the Restricted section.

"Look at this," said Lucius, laying the book down on the desk and showing her an illustration. It was of a man, a full-grown wizard wearing elaborate robes. He held a wand in his left hand. His right hand, in fact his whole right arm, was encased in what looked like an elaborate metal glove, ending in a carved, pincer-like extremity that looked very nasty indeed. Hermione swallowed hard.

"Is that...some sort of weapon?" she asked, pointing at the picture.

"That," said Lucius, looking fondly at the book, "is the Lacertus Curse. A very advanced form of sorcery, in which a metal arm crafted by Dark magic is grafted onto the arm of a living human man."

"For what purpose?" asked Hermione.

"When the arm is grafted onto a human being, it becomes a powerful and selective sorcerous weapon. In essence, its touch destroys any person who is nonmagical."

"It kills Muggles," said Hermione flatly.

"And Mudbloods," said Lucius. "It's very effective that way."

She looked at him. He was looking pleased, as if he were showing her a picture of some nice begonias he had planted, and not of a terrifying weapon.

"You're going to put this spell on Harry Potter," she said dully.

"Not me personally," said Lucius, shutting the book with a snap. "Voldemort. I will, of course, assist him."

He was giving her that look again. The one she didn't like. Hermione began to back towards the wall as Lucius moved towards her.

"Once the Lacertus Curse is on him, our Master will place him under the Imperius Curse. Think how it will look, the great Harry Potter going around using Dark magic to slaughter Muggles and half-breeds. Many will come running to Voldemort for protection. And he will give it, at a price."

They were right up against the bookshelves now and Lucius placed one hand on either side of her torso, effectively pinning her to the wall. She was torn between the desperate urge to shove him away and the equally desperate urge to find out more about what they planned to do to Harry.

"Why Harry?" she said, and quickly amended herself, "Why Harry Potter? Why doesn't Voldemort just kill Harry Potter and put the arm on someone else--someone he won't have to use the Imperius Curse on?"

"To bear the Lacertus Curse is deadly," said Lucius. "It drains the energy of the bearer and kills him slowly. So Harry will die, but he will die in our Master's service. An irony I am sure you appreciate. Now hold still, you stupid girl, I'm trying to kiss you."

Hermione gaped at him. "But you're Draco's *father*," she said.

"And therefore in an excellent position to assure you that you are far too good for him," said Lucius breezily.

"You don't even know me," said Hermione, pushing his hands away.

"That," said Lucius, "is about to change."

And he reached for her again, this time getting a firm grip on her waist. Hermione tried to elbow him, but he skipped nimbly around her. He was quite fast on his feet for such a tall man.

Something rushed by Hermione's head, stirring her hair.

THWACK!

"*Yeeow!*" yelled Lucius. He staggered backward, clapping a hand to his temple, which was running with blood. A heavy brass candlestick had flown through the air and clipped the side of his head with impressive force.

"Who threw that?" Lucius looked around wildly. "Where are you?"

Another object came sailing through the air--a china paperweight in the shape of a lizard. Lucius ducked and it smashed into the wall behind him.

Hermione realized she was grinning.

Draco.

"Do you have a poltergeist, Mister Malfoy?" she said loudly, over the sound of crashing glass, as an invisible someone upended the drinks tray in the corner.

Lucius said a number of rude things. It was easy to see where Draco had gotten his extensive vocabulary of swear words.

Epicyclical Elaborations of Sorcery suddenly flew into the air and made straight for Lucius' head. Lucius reached around, grabbed Hermione, and shoved her in front of him. The book struck her in the shoulder and fell to the ground.

"Ow," she said reproachfully, glaring at Lucius. He was pale and sweating, and he had one hand clamped over his chest. For a second she thought he might be having a heart attack. Then she realized he was holding something protectively in his closed fist.

The study was silent. She had a feeling Draco had probably gotten it out of his system at this point.

Lucius lowered his hands and Hermione saw something glitter on his chest. She was about to say something, when she realized he was staring over her head at the door. She followed his gaze and saw Harry and Narcissa standing in the doorway. Harry was looking at her anxiously. Narcissa just looked blank.

"I brought the dress you asked for, Lucius," she said. She was holding a bundle of material in her hands.

"Thank you," said Lucius, with an admirable amount of calm considering that he had just been attacked by unseen forces and was still bleeding from his temple. He put his hand up to his head now, and as he did so, Hermione caught sight of the glittering thing on his chest again.

It was a circular glass pendant, hanging on a fine gold chain. The glass was very clear, and in the center of it Hermione could see something suspended. Something that looked like....a tooth.

Weird, she thought. But then, what about Lucius *wasn't* weird?

Across the room, her eyes met Harry's. *Get me out of here*, she thought at him fiercely.

Harry came striding over and took her hand. "I think Amanda might like to lie down before the reception," he said. "Can I take her to...." He broke off, looking awkward. He had been about to say "my room", but Lucius and Narcissa didn't seem the sort of parents to want their teenage son's girlfriend sleeping in his bedroom.

"Her room?" Lucius finished. "No. Your mother can escort her. I need you for a moment, Draco."

Harry looked at Hermione helplessly. She squeezed his hand and went over to Narcissa, who immediately turned and led the way out of the study. Hermione trotted behind her. Narcissa said nothing until they reached a narrow oak door, which she pushed open, revealing a small bedroom. It had the stone walls that Hermione was getting used to in this place, but the bedspread was a pretty one with a design of blue flowers.

"This is your room," said Narcissa. She handed Hermione the bundle of material, which was cold and silky to the touch. "And this is the dress."

"Um. Thank you," said Hermione.

Narcissa looked at Hermione consideringly. "Wait," she said. Then she turned and left the room, reappearing a moment later with a pair of fancy silver shoes and a box. "I thought you might want these," she said. "And the reception is at four."

She left again, this time closing the door behind her. Curious, Hermione opened the box. It appeared to hold cosmetics. Odd, she thought. Most witches just used Lip-Reddening Charms and the like.

She put the box and the shoes down on the bed and started to take off her T-shirt. Then something occurred to her. She lowered her arms slowly.

"Draco?" she said. "Are you in here?"

There was no response, but Hermione thought she sensed a guilty sort of silence emanating from a spot near the wardrobe.

"*I know* you're here!" she said. "I need to get dressed!"

"Go right ahead," said Draco's voice, in rather muffled tones. "I don't mind."

"*Malfoy*," she said threateningly.

"Oh, all right," said Draco, and he suddenly appeared next to the wardrobe, holding the cloak in one hand and grinning all over his face. "You *almost*--"

"I did not almost," said Hermione. "Now turn around and face the wall!"

Grumbling, he did it. Keeping a sharp eye on him, Hermione wiggled out of her jeans and t-shirt and into the dress. The material was very rich and heavy and doubtless expensive. It felt cold against her skin and she did up the laces and bent to strap on the shoes. Finally she straightened up and shook out her hair. "Done," she said.

Draco turned around. He looked utterly startled. "Hermione," he said. "You look beautiful."

"Do I?" she said, astonished.

"Go look in the mirror," he said, gesturing towards the vanity table next to the bed.

Hermione went up to it and looked at herself. And blushed. She had *never* understood how girls like Lavender and Parvati could spend so much money on clothes, but now she did. Money was no object if a dress could make you look like *this*. The beautiful heavy fabric reflected the light like water and the deep violet shade suited her brunette coloring perfectly (although, she thought, it in no way would have suited the real Mandy Brocklehurst, who was wispily blonde.) The dress clung in all the right places and fitted so well Hermione had to wonder if it was enchanted to fit. Not that she cared. She twirled in front of the mirror and watched the skirt flare out.

"Wow," she said.

Draco was sitting on the bed watching her. She could see him reflected in the mirror. She sat down at the vanity table, took a brush of out Narcissa's box and started running it through her hair. She could still see Draco in the mirror behind her, leaning against a bedpost.

"You should be a Beater, not a Seeker," she said. "You have a really good throwing arm."

Draco snorted with laughter. "I can't believe I hit my father in the head with a candlestick."

"I was really glad you were there."

"Were you?" said Draco. He was trying to sound nonchalant, but his left hand was tapping his wand anxiously against the side of his leg. "I saw that Harry kissed you. I thought you'd be pleased...."

"He was just showing your father that he had, you know, a claim on Mandy," said Hermione quietly.

"Didn't work, did it?" said Draco, tapping the wand faster.

"Draco..." She turned around and reached out for him.

He brushed her hand away. "It's all right. I know he's a bastard, my father."

She felt desperately sorry for him, but couldn't think of anything to say.

They was silent for a moment. Then he said, "D'you think...when we get back to school...we'll be friends still, like we are now?"

"When we take the spell off you, you won't even want to be," she said.

Draco looked unconvinced by this. "Well, suppose I do," he said. "You're not under a spell. What do you think?"

"Draco, there's hardly any school left. It's June."

Draco become deeply interested in his shoelace. "Maybe I could come and see you over the summer, then."

Hermione dropped her brush. "What?"

"If you're not doing anything," he said quickly.

"What?" she said again.

Now he looked irritated - a bit of the old Draco flashed in his eyes, Entitlement Boy as Parvati used to call him. "Are you saying you don't want me to come?"

A sudden wild image appeared in Hermione's head, of Draco sitting at her dining room table in between her fat Aunt Matilda and her deaf Great-Uncle Stuart, both of whom had been accountants. They were trying to engage Draco in coversation about Wimbledon, and Draco, looking very out of place in long black robes and a top hat, was having none of it. Eventually he took out his wand and turned everyone at the table into toads.

The wild image passed, and Hermione said, "Draco! You'll hate them! They're all *Muggles*!"

"Might be all right," he said stiffly. "I've got really good manners."

An equally vivid image came to her of Draco with her family on their annual beach holiday in Brighton. Draco was wearing swimming trunks (did he *own* swimming trunks? Did he even have knees? --she had never seen them) and haughtily refusing her mother's offer of an ice pop. "Come on, you'll like it," said Hermione's mother. Draco took out his wand and turned her into a toad.

You're going mad, Hermione, she told herself. She swiveled around in her chair and looked at Draco.

"Look," she said. "If we get back to school and you still want to come see me over the summer, then yes, you can."

He brightened. "Really?"

"Uh, yes," said Hermione, thinking that come September, her whole family would likely be hopping around on lily pads.

"Has Harry come to visit you over the summer?" said Draco neutrally.

"Yes," said Hermione, "but he's quite used to Muggles and my parents really love him, so..." she trailed off at Draco's expression. "Would you leave me alone about Harry?" she snapped. "He's my best friend and if that is some kind of problem for you..."

"That wasn't a very best-friendly kiss he gave you in the study," snapped Draco.

"I told you! He was just making a point to your father!"

"You go on and tell yourself that, Hermione," said Draco. "But I bet you liked it. Didn't you?"

"Oh, shut up, Malfoy."

"Didn't you?"

She threw her brush down on the table with a clatter. "Yes! I did!"

"You better make your mind up, Hermione," he said with a burst of sharp anger. "We're wizards, you know, not Mormons."

"I'll keep that I mind if I decide to marry either one of you."

They glowered at each other.

"You know what I mean," he said darkly.

"Maybe I don't know," said Hermione, rather unkindly. "Maybe you should spell it out."

Draco just glared at her and she glared back. She had always thought that only Harry could thoroughly exasperate her like this, but apparently that wasn't the case.

"I'm not your *girlfriend*," she said waspishly. "And I'm not Harry's girlfriend either. And may I point out that NEITHER OF YOU has indicated they even want to be my boyfriend. So if I want to...to run off with...Neville Longbottom, that's MY business and not either of yours."

Draco stopped glaring and snorted with laughter. "Do you really want to run off with Neville Longbottom? Because Hermione Longbottom is a terrible name."



Hermione felt her mouth twitch into a reluctant smile. Draco was leaning on the back of her chair now. Their two faces were reflected in the mirror, side by side. His dark hair was sticking out in every direction, it looked like he couldn't control it any better than Harry could. *We look so good together*, she thought, and then felt a bubble of guilty confusion travel up from her stomach and pop inside her chest. *Get a grip*, she told herself, and started rummaging in Narcissa's cosmetics box.

There was a knock on the bedroom door; it opened, and Harry came in. She couldn't believe how tired he looked. There were black circles under his eyes and he looked

even paler than Draco usually did. But he smiled when he saw her.

"Hey," he said.

"Harry," she said, "You're all right?"

"For now," he replied. "You?"

"I'm fine," she said, and stood up.

The result of this was somewhat unexpected. Harry looked as if a very heavy weight of some sort had fallen on his head. He literally took a step back, and stared.

"*Hermione*," he said, sounding a lot like Draco had, "you....look...."

"Yes?" she said.

But Harry didn't appear to have anything else to say. He just stared.

"Well, that's got rid of him for the moment," said Draco to Hermione. "Shall we get on with our conversation?"

That's it, Hermione thought to herself. Whatever else happens, I am *keeping* this dress. Lucius Malfoy will have to pry my cold dead fingers off it before I agree to give it up.

"Sure," said Hermione.

"What were we talking about?" said Draco.

"*Hogwarts: A History*," said Hermione, grinning.

This snapped Harry out of his daze. He looked at Draco in astonishment. "You've read *Hogwarts: A History*?"

"Why is this such a big deal?" Draco wondered aloud.

Harry looked none too pleased. "If you don't know I'm not going to tell you," he said.

Draco eyed him coolly. "You can't go to the reception looking like that, Potter," he said. "You look like you lay down and slept in your clothes."

Harry turned a scowling face on Draco. "Sorry if I'm not neat enough for you, Malfoy," he snapped. "I'm a bit tired. I've just spent the past hour helping your wretched father clean up his stupid office. Which *you* wrecked."

"I guess I shouldn't have done that," said Draco with false contrition. "I guess I should have sat back and let him TAKE HERMIONE'S CLOTHES OFF AND SNOG HER ON THE DESK!" He screamed this last bit, and Harry flinched in surprise. His eyes went immediately to Hermione.

"Is that true?" he said tensely.

Hermione bit her lip and nodded.

"I'm going to kill him," said Harry tonelessly. "When we get Sirius out. I'm going to come back and kill him. If I can't do *Avada Kedavra* on him, I'll chop off his head with one of his damn fencing swords."

Hermione was too shocked to say anything. She had never seen Harry look like this, never. It scared her.

"It's kind of rude," said Draco, "to talk about killing my dad when I'm standing right here, isn't it, Potter?"

"Are you going to try to stop me, Malfoy?" said Harry. "Because I don't advise it."

Draco, who had been lying on the bed on his stomach, sat up slowly. "And I advise you to let this go," he said. His own eyes were glittering angrily now. "Hermione is fine."

"She's not fine," said Harry. "She's had Malfoys trying to get into her pants all day, how could she be fine?"

"Fuck you, Potter," said Draco, getting to his feet and taking his wand out. Harry did the same. Hermione swiftly put herself between them, feeling deeply resentful of the whole situation.

"I AM FINE!" she yelled. "I AM PERFECTLY ALL RIGHT. IT IS YOU TWO THAT HAVE THE PROBLEM."

"I don't have a problem," said Draco. He was smiling a very horrible smile, which made Hermione stare in disbelief - she had never in her life seen an expression like that on Harry's face, it was as bizarre to her as if she had caught Lucius Malfoy salsa-dancing in the hallway. "*He's* got a problem."

"Oh, for God's sake," said Hermione in disgust, took her wand out of her pocket, and said, "*Expelliarmus!*"

Both their wands soared into her grasp and she pocketed them. They stared at her in astonishment.

"Now," she said, "if you want to start killing each other, you will have to do it with old-fashioned bloodshed. Although I advise both of you to avoid stepping on my dress while you pound on each other, or damaging it in any way, because if you do, there *will* be Dark magic done in this room. And it will be done by me."

Draco was grinning again, but it was a much more pleasant grin this time. "Whatever you say," he said.

But Harry wasn't smiling. Hermione looked over at him, and what she saw made her stomach flip-flop. He looked very pale, even paler than Draco usually looked, and his silver-blond hair was pasted to his forehead in sweaty tendrils. He was breathing unsteadily.

"Harry," she said in alarm, "are you all right?"

Harry shook his head, then sat down very suddenly on the floor. Hermione threw herself down next to him, and he grabbed her wrist and held it tightly. Neither of them moved for several moments. Then Harry stood up, looking ghastly white but otherwise normal, and said, "I've got to go get dressed for the reception. I'll be right back," and left the room, shutting the door behind him.

"He's gone mental," said Draco flatly, as soon as the door was shut.

"No," said Hermione, getting to her feet, "he's just feeling all sorts of things he's never felt before and he doesn't know how to deal with it. Harry isn't used to feeling hate, he doesn't hate people. Not even you," she added, with the ghost of a smile.

"Oh, come on," said Draco. "Surely he hates *me*?"

Hermione shook her head.

"I must be losing my touch," said Draco, and when she didn't smile, he added more seriously: "He's not a *saint*, Hermione."

"No," said Hermione quietly. "Just the best and bravest person I've ever known."

Draco didn't say anything after that. He sat quietly on the bed and after a few moments Hermione sat down next to him and put her head on his shoulder. He put his hand on her head, and very gently stroked her hair.

"Hermione...." he began.

"Shush," she said. "I'm not making some kind of gesture, Draco. I'm just doing this because right now, I want to. Is that okay?"

"Yeah," he said. "It's okay."

The party was quite as horrible as Hermione had expected. It was held in one of a set of enormous cold ballrooms, and the whole room was packed with Death Eaters in black robes. She was the only female there, aside from a huge woman in black satin whose laugh sounded like a cement mixer grinding.

"That's Eleftheria Parpis," said Harry in Hermione's ear. "I caught her and Lucius having a go at it in the drawing-room."

"Yech," said Hermione.

Harry smiled. He seemed to have recovered somewhat. He was looking a bit pale, but otherwise composed, in some of Draco's black fancy-dress robes. Various Death Eaters kept stopping and greeting him, and she could tell he was having a job trying to pretend he knew who they all were, but he was looking cool and unruffled. Very Draco-like, in fact. It was odd, she thought, she had always hated Draco far too much to see that he was good-looking, whatever Lavender and Parvati might say. But now

she saw it; in fact, she saw that he was, in a classical sense, much better-looking than Harry could ever hope to be. It wasn't a beauty that made her stomach flip over, like Harry's did, but she did recognize that it was there.

"Lucius is some kind of sex maniac, I think," she whispered to Harry.

"Must be," said Harry. "After all, he tried to have it off with you, didn't he?" and he yelped with laughter as Hermione hit him playfully on the arm.

"Isn't there anything to eat?" said Hermione, looking around hopefully.

"I dunno," said Harry. "I think



Lucius just got everyone together to tell them about his newest diabolical scheme, I don't think he was planning on feeding them."

"Do you think we can sneak off yet?" asked Hermione, craning her neck to scan the crowd. Somewhere by the wall, Draco was standing, wrapped in the invisibility cloak. She had explained the details of Lucius' plan to the boys, and they had decided to go and get Sirius right away. They had hoped that during the confusion of the party, they could all three sneak off to the drawing room and get down into the dungeons to rescue Sirius. So far there hadn't been an opening during which she and Harry could dart away, though.

"We could try," said Harry. "If they catch us they'll just think we're skulking off to make out."

"Hurray for teenage hormones," said Hermione. "Let's go snog behind a tapestry."

"Indeed," said a voice behind her. It was Lucius. Hermione jumped and blushed. Eleftheria Parpis was with him; she was looking down at Hermione in a motherly sort of manner.

"Who can blame you, dear?" she said. "Draco is getting very handsome. Just like his father," she added, looking at Lucius in a sickening sort of way.

"Uh," said Hermione.

"Mandy was just kidding," said Harry.

"I'm sure," said Lucius, smiling a smile that didn't reach his eyes. Hermione had a feeling he was still fractious with her for having repelled his advances. "Eleftheria, this is Amanda Brocklehurst, my son's girlfriend." Hermione smiled at Eleftheria politely.

"Good news, Draco," Lucius added. "Harry Potter was spotted in Malfoy Park by the owner of the Cold Christmas Inn. He sent me an owl just now."

"That is good news," said Harry faintly. "Was he with anyone?"

"At least one person that we know of," said Lucius blandly. "Some girl."

"So he'll be here soon," said Harry.

"And will find a welcoming party ready to receive him," said Lucius.

A terrible silence descended on Hermione and Harry. Neither of them could think of anything to say. Finally, Hermione said, "Harry's got loads of girlfriends, it could be any of them."

"I'm sure," said Lucius. He gave them both a measuring look, then said, "Have fun, children," and disappeared into the crowd with Eleftheria behind him.

"At the risk of sounding like someone in a comic-book," said Harry, "I think this means we're getting short on time. We better do this now."

Hermione agreed with a fervent nod, and they headed off toward the end table where they had left Draco. They said nothing, but a rustling noise indicated that he had joined them, and all three of them ducked through the nearest doorway. They followed Draco's whispered instructions, heading towards the drawing room.

"Loads of girlfriends," said Harry, shaking his head as they rounded a corner. "I do *not* have loads of girlfriends. I am not a *player*, Hermione."

"I know that," she said, trying not to laugh.

"At the moment," Harry continued, "my girlfriend count stands at *zero*."

"That's cause you're always wasting your time chasing after Cho," said Hermione, nettled. "Who doesn't want to go out with you anyway."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," said Draco's disembodied voice.

Harry glared suspiciously at the empty space where Draco was likely standing, "What do you mean?"

"I think she may have experienced a drastic change in her feelings towards you."

"Did you do something to her, Malfoy?" snapped Harry.

"Not *to* her, per se," said Draco. Hermione could *hear* him smirking, "*With* her, maybe. A little of the old Malfoy charm and she was begging me for a date."

"Ah, yes," said Harry. "the famous Malfoy charm. Was that what convinced your dad you were gay, or was it just your hair?"

Draco ignored him. "Anyway, I told her you weren't interested."

"Why did you do a stupid thing like that?" snapped Harry.

"Because," said Draco. "You aren't. Oh, look," he added, before Harry could say anything else, "here we are."

A fire was burning in the drawing room grate, but the room was blessedly empty. A new portrait was hanging on the wall above the trap door, this time of a short, angry-looking man with an obvious toupee whose name proclaimed him to be OCTAVIUS MALFOY.

Harry bent down to pull the rug aside.

"I don't think you want to do that, Draco," said a soft voice from behind them.

They whipped around. Lucius Malfoy was standing in the doorway, surrounded by a crowd of Death Eaters. Eleftheria was standing by his side, and she was no longer looking motherly in any way. Her huge black eyes looked like caverns in her pudgy white face.

"You," she said to Hermione. "What did you say your name was?"

"Amanda," said Hermione haltingly. "Amanda Brocklehurst."

"I know the Brocklehursts," said Eleftheria, coming forward into the room. "And I know their daughter, Amanda. You are not Amanda." She turned to the Death Eaters on either side of her. "Seize hold of her," she said.

Several things happened at once. The Death Eaters started forward. Hermione backed away in terror. And Harry dropped the corner of the rug he was holding, stepped sideways, and put himself between Hermione and the Death Eaters.

"Get out of the way, Draco," said Lucius harshly.

"No," said Harry. "Leave her alone."

"She's a spy," said Eleftheria coldly. "She is a friend of the Enemy. She was *recognized*, Draco, by the owner of the inn in Malfoy Park. She came here not to visit you, but with Harry Potter. The innkeeper saw her at the reception and told us as much."

"You cannot be blamed, I suppose," added Lucius, "for having unfortunate taste in girls. Better men than you have been fooled by beautiful women. But I advise you to step aside, Draco. I don't want to hurt you, but I will."

"Liar," said Harry, "You love hurting me."

Lucius smiled. "Maybe," he said, and nodded at the two Death Eaters standing in front of Harry. Harry went for his wand, but it was futile. There were two of them, and one of him. He had time to hit one of them with the Impediment charm, but the other never even reached for his own wand. Instead, he made a grab for Harry, seized him, and threw him to the ground. As Harry struggled to get up, the Death Eater kicked him hard in the side of the head with his steel-toed boot.

Harry crumpled.

The Death Eater kicked him again.

"Careful," said Lucius in a silky drawl. "That's my only heir you're manhandling."

The Death Eater glanced down at Harry. "He's alive," he said. "But he won't be getting up any time soon."

"Then let him lie," said Lucius. "Bring me the girl."

The two Death Eaters seized Hermione by the arms, but she barely noticed. She was staring at Harry, who was lying on the ground in a widening pool of blood. They propelled her forward until she was standing directly in front of Lucius.

"Hallo, Amanda," he said. "Shall I bother to ask you your real name? I think not, since we're not terribly interested in you. We're interested in the Potter boy. Where is he?"

Hermione had her eyes squeezed shut, but she could still see the image of Harry against her inner lids. "You *killed* him," she said, and called Lucius a name she had never known she knew. She must have picked it up from Draco.

"Draco will be fine," said Lucius impatiently. "And don't pretend you care. You came here with Harry Potter. Where is he?"

Hermione opened her eyes and looked into Lucius' gray ones. They were as cold as winter.

She shook her head.

"Fine," said Lucius indifferently, took out his wand, and placed the tip of it against her chest, just over her heart. He put his face close to hers. Close enough to kiss her.

"*Crucio*," he said.

It was the worst pain she had ever felt, ever imagined. She was being burned, cut, sliced, torn open; she was wrecked and ravaged; her body would never be the same again. She could hear herself crying out in agony and yet it seemed she had gone deaf and blind, the world was going white; she screamed and screamed; she was dying.

Lucius took the wand away and the pain stopped. Hermione slumped to her knees, the Death Eaters letting go of her arms, and covered her face in her hands.

"Hurts, doesn't it?" said Lucius.

"Don't be stupid," said Hermione. Her voice sounded tinny and strange to her own ears. "Of course it hurts."

Lucius took a step forward, put one booted foot on her shoulder, and pushed. Without the strength to hold herself upright, Hermione fell sideways and lay on her back, staring up at Draco's father. *I'm going to die*, she thought wildly. *I'm going to die and I never got a chance to tell-*

"You don't have to die," said Lucius, as if reading her thoughts. "Just tell us where Harry Potter is."

Hermione said nothing.

Lucius sighed and raised his wand again. "*Cru-*"

"Stop it!" someone shouted from across the room - sounding to Hermione like a million miles away. "Leave her alone!"

She knew who had spoken immediately, and a sharp stab of despair pierced through her like a nail. *No*, she thought, *Draco. Don't.*

But there was nothing she could do. Draco had pulled the invisibility cloak off himself and was holding it in his hand, quite visible, quite unprotected. All the Death Eaters had turned to stare at him in shock; an expression of triumph was spreading over Lucius Malfoy's face.

"Leave her alone," Draco said again, in an unsteady voice. He looked terrified -- he was white as a ghost, and sweat had plastered his black hair to his forehead. But he seemed determined. "It's me. Harry Potter. *I'm here.*"

Chapter Eight - Malfoy Blood

There was light, and it moved beyond the skin of his eyelids like darting points of fire. Harry groaned and opened his eyes.

He was in Draco's bedroom, lying spread-eagled on the bed -- he couldn't have laid any other way, since each of his wrists was tied to a bedpost. His head ached with a dull, booming pain as if someone were striking a gong behind his temples.

"Hold still," said a voice.

Harry whipped his head to the side and stared. It was Narcissa. She was holding a large, bone-handled saw.

Harry shut his eyes again. *I'm having a nightmare*, he told himself. *And it's a really dumb one.*

He opened his eyes, but Narcissa was still there. She had applied the edge of the saw to the ropes that bound his left hand to the bed and was sawing away at them. She was very pale, and her eyes were twitching from side to side in that weird little tic Harry was beginning to get used to. He did wish she wouldn't do it while holding a saw so close to his artery, though.

"Narcissa," he said. "I mean, Mum. What..?" His left arm came free, and he turned on his side to watch her slicing away at the ropes on his right.

"Your father," said Narcissa haltingly, "doesn't want you trying to get into the dungeons to get to your girlfriend." She held up a hand at the panicked expression that flashed across Harry's face. "She's fine. He put her in with Sirius Black." Her eyes twitched again. "Sirius will look after her."

His right arm came free. Harry sat up and started massaging the blood back into his hands. The last thing he remembered was being knocked to the floor by one of Lucius' Death Eaters. "They didn't hurt Hermione, did they?" he asked. "Because Lucius was about to..."

"Oh, he would have killed her," said Narcissa woodenly. "He did the Cruciatus Curse on her to try to get her to tell him where Harry Potter was. But she wouldn't."

Harry went from feeling numb to feeling like he was going to throw up. "*What happened?*"

"Your father," she said (he realized she never said Lucius' name, she had never, in his memory, said it once) "says that Harry Potter was there. Apparently he has an Invisibility Cloak of some sort. He revealed himself and," she showed no emotion as she said this, "the Death Eaters took him."

Harry struggled to sit up. He put his numb hands on top of Narcissa's hands, which were as cold as ice. She was still holding the knife. "Mum," he said. "Please believe me, this is really important. I know it's hard for you, but... is Harry still alive?"

She nodded.

"Where is he?"

"In the fencing room," she said. As she spoke, two huge tears slid out of her eyes and down her thin face. Harry felt horribly sorry for her, but his mind was on getting to Draco. He slid off the bed, tested his legs (they worked) and raced out the door. Narcissa watched him go.

In her dream, Hermione was in Diagon Alley. She was with Harry, and they were shopping for socks. This was a new one on Hermione - she had never dreamt about sock-shopping with Harry before. Harry made frequent appearances in her dreams, usually looking a lot better than he did in real life and sometimes wearing nothing *but* socks - but this dream didn't seem to be tending in that direction. This Harry was fully dressed and looking very serious.

They weren't getting far with their sock search. All the stores seemed to be boarded up, dark and empty. People on the street hurried past without looking at them, eyes on the ground. Hermione tried to take Harry's hand, but he shook his head.

"I've got to sit down," he said. "It hurts."

"What hurts?" she asked.

Harry drew his jacket open. She looked down and saw that the black handle of a ten-inch knife was protruding from between his ribs. His white t-shirt was turning red with blood and blood was pattering down onto his shoes like rain. "The knife," he said. "It's not mine, you know. It's Draco's."

Hermione screamed.

"*Enervate*," said a voice in her ear. "Come on, Hermione. Wake up!"

She opened her eyes and saw Sirius' face. What a horrible dream, she thought. Normally she never voluntarily cut short a dream with Harry in it. But she was glad to be rid of that one.

"Sirius," she said in a croaky voice. "Hey."

His face split into a tired smile. "You're awake," he said. "That's good. Sorry about yelling at you. I don't have my wand, so I had to do the best I could."

Hermione began to raise herself up on her elbows. Every part of her body hurt as if she had been beaten. She looked around. She was in a dank rock-bound cell with one

barred wall. A stone bench ran along the opposite wall. She seemed to be alone with Sirius.

"Oh my God," she said, sitting straight up and grabbing Sirius' arm. "*Harry*. And *Draco*! Where are they?"

"I don't know," said Sirius, looking very sober. "I was hoping you could tell me that."

She shook her head wildly.

"A group of Death Eaters brought you down here," he said reluctantly. "Harry and Draco weren't with them. They tossed you in with me and left." He patted her shoulder awkwardly. "Do you remember what happened, Hermione?"

Hermione felt herself teetering on the edge of panicky tears. "It was horrible," she said. "The Death Eaters took Draco. They think he's Harry. And Harry..." The tears threatened to spill over, but she forced herself to speak slowly, filling Sirius in on the whole evening's events. "And then Draco took off the invisibility cloak and they sort of...closed in around him. I didn't see what happened after that, I didn't see what happened to Harry or to Draco. I think Lucius hit me with the Stupefying Hex." Now the tears did spill. "Draco could be *dead*, Sirius."

"They won't kill him," said Sirius. "They think he's Harry; they're going to put that Lacertus curse on him. And for that, they need Voldemort. So we have a little time."

"How much time does it take to summon Voldemort?" asked Hermione wildly. "How long does it take him to get here?"

"Well...." said Sirius reluctantly. "It's not like he takes the bus, Hermione. Voldemort can probably Apparate here instantly. But," he added, "if I know Lucius, he'll want to have everything prepared and perfect beforehand - no nasty surprises for the Dark Lord when he gets here."

"I hate Lucius," said Hermione vehemently. "He's a freakish, evil, jewelry-wearing pervert who doesn't even care about his own son."

"He's a lot more than that," said Sirius, with a half smile. "He's-"

He broke off and looked at her thoughtfully.

"What?" said Hermione.

"What did you say about Lucius wearing jewelry?"

"He has this really ugly pendant he wears," said Hermione. "He seems very attached to it. He kept putting his hand on it when he was...you know...trying to have it off with me in the study." She blushed furiously.

"Describe it," said Sirius.

Hermione described it: a gold chain with a clear glass charm pendant, in which an object was suspended, an object that looked a little like a human tooth. When she got to the part about the tooth, Sirius jumped to his feet and started pacing back and forth across the cell.

"I thought so..." he muttered. "It's been in the back of my mind all this time.... I just didn't know how he was doing it."

"Doing what?" said Hermione, turning her head to follow Sirius' anxious progress.

"Controlling her," said Sirius.

"Controlling who?" demanded Hermione.

"Narcissa," he said, sitting down heavily on the bench.

"Sirius," she said firmly. "Enough with the free-association. Please speak English."

"I don't know how he got her to marry him in the first place," said Sirius, obviously still thinking out loud, "She always hated him. I think he must have used some kind of Coercion Charm on her, if not the Imperious Curse itself."

"Are you saying he *forced* Narcissa to marry him?" said Hermione, interested despite herself. "Oh, that's *just* the sort of thing he'd do, isn't it?" She frowned. "But it doesn't make sense...he can't have kept her under the Imperious curse or something like that for seventeen years; she'd be dead, or mad."

"He wouldn't have needed to after the first year or so," said Sirius quietly. "He had something much better." He looked down at Hermione's bewildered expression. "Have you ever heard of an Epicyclical Charm?"

"Lucius has a book about them in his study. The Lacertus curse is in it." She shuddered. "It looks really nasty, the book, I mean."

"They're spells that have to do with transferring the essence of people and animals into things. It's hard to explain, but a lot of it is Dark magic for reasons that should be obvious. You can take something from a person...the younger they are when you do it, the better...like hair, or a tooth, and turn it into an object. Like a pendant. And that object will contain the essence of that person, what the Greeks called the life-spark. If you destroy or damage that thing..."

"You kill the person?" said Hermione.

"Exactly."

"So Lucius....you think he took one of Draco's teeth when he was a baby?"

"I think," said Sirius, "he's been wearing Draco's life around his neck since the day Draco was born. Draco wouldn't know about it, of course. But Narcissa would. All

Lucius would have to do is break the pendant, crush it, and Draco would die. If Narcissa left him...if she defied him..."

"But Draco is his *son*," said Hermione, "his only heir, he said so."

"He's just a possession to Lucius," said Sirius. "You don't know him, but I knew him at the Ministry. He was a master manipulator, a pure careerist. Draco would just be a thing to him, something to own and control."

Hermione thought of her own boring dentist parents. "Poor Draco," she said.

Harry hurtled down the corridors, praying not to be seen, ("Hey! Kid! Slow down!" yelled the portrait of one of Draco's vampire ancestors as he passed it) and darted in through the oak double doors of the fencing room. It was just as it had been when Lucius had brought Harry on his first day at the Manor -- or nearly so. The tapestries showing scenes of wizard battle were unchanged, so was the fencing ring, but in the far corner a weird kind of structure had been erected. It was like nothing Harry had ever seen before.

Glittering bars of light, each about five inches apart, ran from floor to ceiling. They were in the shape of a rough square, about five feet by seven feet. It was a cage, Harry realized, a cage made of light...and inside the cage was Draco.

Harry approached the cage cautiously. It was evident that whatever else it was, it was a powerful magical object, and Harry's experience with powerful magical objects told him that they were not to be messed with.

Draco was lying on his back on the floor, staring up at the ceiling. For a moment Harry was afraid they might have put the Body-Bind Curse on him, but he turned his head as Harry approached and almost smiled.

"Hey," he said.

He had a black eye and his upper lip was cut. Under his left sleeve cuff, Harry could see that one of his wrists was swollen to the size of a tennis ball.

"They knocked you around," said Harry flatly.

"It's all right," said Draco, returning his gaze to the ceiling. "If there's one thing I learned when I was a kid, it's to take a beating."

Harry knelt down next to the bars. "Malfoy," he said. "Narcissa told me what you did. That was the bravest thing I've ever heard of. Also the stupidest. But it was really brave."

"Thanks," said Draco. "It was probably *you*. The brave bit and the stupid bit."

Harry shook his head. "I don't think so. Well," he admitted, "maybe the stupid bit."

Draco smiled faintly.

"Look," said Harry. "I came up here to get you out. Then you can let me down into the dungeons and we can get--"

Draco shook his head. "Not possible," he said. "I know this Imprisonment charm. It would take a really powerful dark wizard or an Auror to take it off. And the bars are physically unbreakable."

Harry couldn't believe Draco seemed so resigned. "I won't leave you here," he said.

"This might be the time you learn there are some things even you can't do," said Draco. "Might be good for you."

"Not for you, though," said Harry. "Come on, Malfoy...*think*."

"Okay. There is one thing." Draco was looking at the ceiling again.

"What?"

"I think you know, Potter," said Draco. "In fact, it's something you'll probably enjoy."

Harry shook his head, bewildered.

Draco sat up and crawled over to where Harry was kneeling, taking care not to put weight on his sprained wrist. "It's pretty simple, really," he said. "I need you to kill me."

Harry goggled at him. "*What?*"

"I can teach you to do *Avada Kedavra*," said Draco, in the helpful tone of someone offering him a pen he had asked for. "It won't be hard."

"You're mental," said Harry, awed. "I'm not going to *kill* you, Malfoy."

Draco was now kneeling opposite Harry. He looked at him very intently. "Think about it, Potter," he said. "It'll just be dying a little earlier than I will anyway when they get their hands on me, and do that Lacertus thing -- and what'll happen if it works? They'll put the Imperius Curse on me and use me as a tool to kill Muggles and Mudbloods. I might not last as long as you - I haven't got a will as strong as yours - but I'll last long enough to kill the first Muggle-Born I come across. And *who do you think that will be?*"

Harry shut his eyes. "Oh, no."

"My dad," said Draco flatly, "will think it's pretty funny to make Harry Potter murder his own girlfriend. In fact, if he's keeping Hermione alive, that's probably why."

"I hate your father, Malfoy," said Harry without opening his eyes.

"Yeah," said Draco. "I hate him too."

And they were silent for a moment, neither of them looking at the other, heads bent in fierce contemplation -- one dark, one fair; one outside the prison bars, one within.

"It's really a pity we're not related," said Draco finally, in a far-off voice. "I bet your friend Sirius down in the dungeon could take the imprisonment charm off. He's meant to be a really powerful wizard."

"Yeah," said Harry. "If only-" He broke off, jerked his head up and stared wildly at Draco. "That's it!" he breathed. "That is it! You're brilliant, Malfoy! I would kiss you, but that would be gross!"

Draco looked at him blankly. "Huh?"

"Give me your hand," said Harry.

"Why?" said Draco, suspiciously.

"Just give it to me," said Harry impatiently. With the expression of someone who no longer much cares what happens to him, Draco put his hand through the bars, and Harry took it. It was the first time in his life he had ever touched Draco Malfoy voluntarily, and later he would have cause to remember the moment, but right now he was in too much of a hurry to think about it. He scrabbled into the pocket of his jeans with his other hand, took out the knife Sirius had given him for his 14th birthday, and flicked open the blade.

Then he slashed it viciously across Draco's palm. Blood spurted out of the cut, drenching the sleeve of Draco's shirt.

"Hey!" said Draco, trying to yank his hand back. "What're you doing?"

But Harry had now turned the knife on himself, and cut his own palm open. He dropped the knife, extended his hand, and seized Draco's bleeding one, pressing the cuts tightly together.

"I'm touched that you want to be blood brothers with me," said Draco, peering down at their bloody, interlocked hands. "But is this really the time?"

"Shut up, Malfoy," said Harry, who was grinning like a madman. "Come on, think about it. *Malfoy blood*. Only someone with Malfoy blood *in their veins* can open the trap door."

Draco's mouth fell open. Then he leaned forward, and gripped Harry's hand as tightly as he could, so tightly his knuckles turned white.

"What're you doing?" said Harry, laughing.

"What does it look like, Potter? I'm trying to bleed faster."

Harry approached the trap door nervously and put his right hand, still sticky with his own blood and Draco's, on the handle. Nothing happened. There was no screaming and no alarm. Emboldened, Harry yanked the door open and crawled down into the space below.

He wondered how long they had before Lucius and the others came for Draco. Draco -- he was actually thinking of him by his first name now, something he would never have thought was possible. Especially since it made him physically ill every time Hermione said the word Draco. *I know you don't like Draco, Harry, but he's changed.*

Changed. Maybe he *has* changed, Harry thought, rounding a cobwebby corner. He had been convinced it was all the Polyjuice spell, but was a spell like that really powerful enough to counteract an entire lifetime devoted entirely to self-interest and compel someone otherwise not heroically inclined to risk his own life for the life of a girl he hardly knew? Harry wasn't sure. What he did know was that, for whatever reason, Draco had saved Hermione from torture and probably death. That put Harry in debt to Draco. He didn't want to be like Snape, doomed to a lifetime of guilt and resentment; he wasn't going to let Draco Malfoy die while he owed him anything.

He was at the dungeon gate now. He lifted his bloody hand and closed it around the lock, which came away as if it had been made of spaghetti. He dropped it, pushed the gate open and hurried inside.

Sirius and Hermione were sitting together on the stone bench at the cell's far end, Sirius looking...well, extremely serious as he explained something to her, Hermione nodding and still looking ridiculously pretty in Narcissa's satin dress. She seemed to sense that Harry was there before he even said anything; she leaped to her feet and ran across the cell, thrusting her arm through the bars to catch at his hand.

"Harry...you're okay?"

"Yeah...ow!"

He winced as she squeezed his slashed hand. She saw the blood and gasped: "Did Lucius...?"

"No. It's not all my blood," he said. "Some of it's Draco's."

She turned greenish. "Is he all right...is he hurt?"

"They beat him up, but not too badly. They're saving him for Voldemort," said Harry tensely. He turned to Sirius. "Do you know anything about Imprisonment spells?"

Draco lay on his back, looking up at the ceiling. He supposed his should be writhing around in panic, but he wasn't. An icy sort of peace had descended on him and he felt almost nothing.

Harry was in the tunnels under the house now. Draco shut his eyes; he could find Harry better in the darkness. It was a little as if there was a cord of invisible light connecting them, with him on one end and Harry on the other -- sometimes it tugged at him, demanding his attention; other times, it was very hard to find Harry at the opposite end. Right now it was easy; he could almost *see* him. *Weird visions*, he thought. *I'm having weird visions*. But it kept him from feeling as if he was alone.

Hermione was with Harry now. It hurt to think about her, like the pain of a broken tooth. But she was alive, and that was at least partly because of him. He wasn't sorry he had done what he had done. He had always sat back and watched Harry doing the ridiculous heroic things that he did and wondered not only *why* he did them, but *how*. Now he knew. You just did what you had to do: there was only one choice that made sense, one way to go, and you took it. It was enviably simple. He wondered, though, would the choice seem so effortless if he didn't have Harry in his head?

When the door of the fencing room opened, Draco thought for a moment that he was imagining it. He turned his head slowly.

It was his father.

And Lucius wasn't alone. A very tall man in long black hooded robes was with him. He was wearing red gloves and carrying a wand. He walked quickly across the room and over to the cage. "*Liberos*," he said, and his voice was a horrible, hissing thing.

The bars of the cage vanished and Draco sat up. He suddenly felt naked, unprotected. The tall man came closer to him and peered down into his face. Then he reached up and drew his hood back.

Draco stifled a yell. A bald, hairless skull the color of blood-- yellow, slitted eyes with vertical cat pupils--- slits for nostrils---a lipless mouth.

"Lucius," said the horrible voice, which belonged, Draco now knew, to Lord Voldemort. "You have done very well here, very well indeed."

Once he let Hermione and Sirius out of the cell, Sirius made Harry describe the glowing cage in which they were keeping Draco several times before he was satisfied. "I can take the spell off," he said. "But I'll need my wand."

"You can use mine," offered Hermione, but Sirius shook his head.

"This is a very involved Charm," he said. "I need my own wand. I know where it is, I saw Lucius put it in a drawer in his study. Look," he added, "in dog form, I can get up there a lot faster than you can. I think I should go ahead, and you two come behind. I'll take the Imprisonment Charm off, if I can, and meet you in Draco's bedroom."

"What if..." Hermione swallowed hard. "You-know-who's already got him?"

Sirius looked grim. "Then I'll still meet you, and we'll figure out what to do from there," he said. He put his hand on Harry's shoulder and Harry looked up at him for a second. Then he nodded. "Okay."

Sirius let go of Harry, and turned immediately into his canine form, in which he loped out of the dungeon. Harry and Hermione followed more slowly. Harry was very silent and looked very unhappy. He was walking very fast, nearly running.

"Is Draco all right?" Hermione asked timidly. "I mean, you said he wasn't too badly hurt, but he must be really afraid."

"He's not too good. In fact, he asked me to kill him," said Harry, climbing over a pile of broken stone. He turned back to help Hermione over the pile and found that she had stopped climbing and was goggling at him.

"What? What did you *say*, Harry?"

"I took out my trusty knife and stuck it in his throat. What do you *think* I said?" snapped Harry, nettled. "I told him he was mental, I'm not going to kill him."

Hermione started to climb after him without assistance. "Why? Not why wouldn't you kill him, but why, you know, did he ask?"

"If they put the Lacertus curse on him, it'll kill him anyway," said Harry soberly. "He doesn't want them to do it, he doesn't want to risk that he might end up murdering people. He said it would just be dying a little earlier than he would anyway."

Hermione stopped stock-still again. Harry began wondering if they were ever going to make any progress. "Harry...." she said.

"What?"

"That's something *you* said. Our first year, when you were going after the Philosopher's Stone...you said that if you-know-who got you, it would just be dying a little earlier than you would anyway."

They looked at each other. "You think that was me talking?" said Harry uneasily.

Hermione looked extremely unhappy. "I don't know," she said. "I don't want to think so."

"I don't think it was," said Harry, rather unexpectedly.

Hermione smiled at him. "I hope not," she said, "I already invited him to come visit me over the summer."

Now it was Harry's turn to stop walking. "He'll turn your whole family into toads, Hermione," he said, eerily echoing her own fears.

"He will not," she said obstinately. "My parents will like him. He's got really good manners, and he dresses well and...and he's read *Hogwarts: A History*."

Harry turned around. Then he came up to Hermione, took her by the arms, and stared intently into her face, something he had never done before. "Do you like him, Hermione? I know you kissed him and all, but do you *like* him?"

"Yeah," she said, surprising herself. "I do, I really do."

"Do you love him?"

"*Harry!*"

"*Could* you love him?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "Yes, I could!" She tried to yank her arms away, but he held on tightly. "I'm getting really fed up with this whole big-brother thing, Harry," she added sharply. "I'm not twelve, and I'm not an idiot, and it is my business who I want to--"

"Hermione," he interrupted her furiously, "you're so *stupid*."

And he kissed her.

It was nothing like kissing Draco. Kissing Draco was sweet and intoxicating and fun. Kissing Harry was none of those things. It was a little like a bomb going off in her head. She felt herself clutching at Harry as if she might fall otherwise, felt Harry gripping her arms with a force that was painful. She would have bruises, but she didn't care. She couldn't breathe, but she didn't care. There was a rock digging into the small of her back but she didn't care. She could feel Harry's heart beating wildly against hers and that was what mattered; that, and the pressure of his mouth on her and the yearning she felt from him as he kissed her.

It was a shock when he let go of her and stepped back. She saw that his chest was rising and falling rapidly as if he had been running. He continued backing up until he was standing against the opposite wall, staring at her in what looked a lot like horror.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't meant to do that. I'm really sorry."

She was bewildered. "Why? What are you sorry for?"

"*This...*" He gestured vaguely at her, at himself. "You and me. Things are chaotic enough already. I didn't mean to make the situation even worse."

"*Worse?*" Hermione stared at him. "Are you saying that kissing me was a bad thing?"

"No! Kissing you...was great," said Harry weakly. Then he straightened up, looking determined. "But I'm still not going to do it again."

"*Why not?*" said Hermione.

"Because," said Harry. He had taken his knife out of his pocket and was fiddling with it. It still had blood on the blade. "It would be wrong."

"Wrong?" Was he crazy? "Draco was right," she said flatly. "You have gone mad."

"I haven't. I've given this a lot of thought, Hermione, don't think I'm just--"

"You don't want to know what I think," she snapped.

"I *do*," said Harry. He was looking desperately unhappy, but Hermione had no patience left to feel sorry for him. She took two steps forward and grabbed him by the front of his robes.

"Say it," she said.

He refused to look at her. "I can't."

"*Say it*, Harry."

Now he looked angry and stubborn, as only Harry could be stubborn. "If you're asking me to tell you how I feel about you," he said, "I can't. I can't and I won't."

"I asked you once before," she said. "I'm not going to ask you again. This is it, Harry, this is the last chance you get, do you understand?"

"I *can't*," he said again.

"Good," she said, and shoved him away. His knife fell to the floor and she bent to pick it up. When she straightened up, she saw Harry staring at her.

"Good?" he echoed in disbelief.

"Yeah," she said, handing the knife to him. Mechanically, he took it. "Good. For six years I've been wondering if you were, you know, the one for me. And now," she said, "Now I know you aren't."

Harry's eyes were wide. "Hermione, I --"

But she brushed past him and started walking. Harry stood there for a moment, gripping the knife very tightly in his hands. Then he followed her.

In dog form, Sirius raced up through the twisting corridors of the dungeons and hurtled out of the trap door. Keeping to the shadows, he crept through the hallways, heading in the direction he recalled that Lucius' study was located. It was lucky, he thought, very lucky that the house was so deserted -- he couldn't imagine where Lucius and the Death Eaters were, but there didn't seem to be anyone around.

He turned the handle of Lucius' study door with a paw, and padded inside. What he saw there shocked him so much that he turned back into his human form without even thinking, and yelled out loud.

Narcissa was sitting behind Lucius' oak desk. She was very pale, and she was holding Sirius' wand in her hands. When she saw him, her eyes began to dart wildly around the room.

"Sirius," she said, and she held out the wand to him with a shaking hand. "I knew you'd come for this. Take it quickly, and go."

He took it. He had a mad urge to touch her hand as he did so, but repressed it. "The fencing room," he said gently. "How do I get there?"

She shook her head. "Just leave, Sirius."

"Narcissa," he said, "I need to get to Harry before the Dark Lord comes for him. Do you understand?"

"I understand," she replied. "But the Dark Lord has *already* come for him."

Draco couldn't believe how hideous Voldemort was. He had never really thought about it, but had always assumed that the Dark Lord looked a lot like any other Death Eater, maybe a little taller or paler, but still human. Looking at Voldemort's slitted, catlike eyes and scaly, noseless face, Draco suddenly felt sorry for Harry. Having to face him time after time. Seeing that face in his dreams. It would be horrible.

Draco knew he should be feeling panicky, but he wasn't. He didn't know why. Partly, he supposed, it was that he could still feel Harry and Hermione at the end of the invisible cord, they were coming up through the tunnels, looking for him, and he could feel their concern and worry. It made him feel less alone, even if he knew there was no way they would make it in time.

He looked over at his father, who was looking both anxious and greedily hopeful. "Are you pleased, Master?" Lucius Malfoy said.

"I am," said the Dark Lord. "Lucius, you and your Death Eaters have done very well."

"Lucius and the Death Eaters," said Draco, wishing his voice didn't sound so croaky. "Kind of sounds like a band name."

Lucius and Voldemort both stared at him. Draco stared back. If he was going to die, he was determined to die being obnoxious, which after all was what he was good at.

The Dark Lord bent and put his hand against Draco's forehead, directly on Harry's lightning scar. His hand was cold. "Does my touch burn you?" he said in his horrible voice. "Does it pain you, Harry Potter?"

"No," said Draco, "but it tickles like hell."

It was evident that Voldemort didn't have a sense of humor. He looked at Lucius, who looked back at him blankly and shrugged. "He's lying," said Lucius.

Voldemort's ugly cat eyes were slitted. "Is he?"

He reached down and drew off one of his gloves. The hand revealed underneath it was a dark red, almost brickish color, with long black nails. There were deep grooves along his palms, like healed cuts or burns.

"Take my hand, Harry Potter," he said, holding it out to Draco.

"Not until you put some lotion on those cuts," said Draco, "they look really nasty."

"Take my hand!"

Voldemort's hand whipped out with the speed of a striking snake and seized hold of Draco's, which he crushed in his grip. It was the hand Harry had cut open and the pain was sharp. The Dark Lord's own hand was as dry and scaly as lizard skin. He had no pulse at all. Draco wrenched his hand away as quickly as he could.

The Dark Lord turned to Lucius Malfoy and the look on his face was not pleasant at all. "Is this some kind of joke, Lucius?"

"I don't --- I don't know what you mean," Lucius stammered.

"This," and Voldemort waved a contemptuous hand at Draco, "this is not Harry Potter. Did you think a feeble disguise would fool *me*? I, who carry Harry Potter's own blood in my veins? I don't know who this is -- some Muggle you've tricked out with Polyjuice Potion---what were you hoping to accomplish, Lucius?"

Lucius Malfoy's face had gone the color of cottage cheese. "Not....Harry....Potter?" he gurgled.

"Don't pretend you didn't know," said Voldemort, but Lucius was in too advanced a state of shock to say anything at all. He was goggling at Draco. Draco waved at him.

"Who *are* you?" Lucius said to him, in a hushed voice. "One of Potter's friends...?"

"Not hardly," said Draco.

"There is a simple solution to this question, Lucius," said Voldemort. He took out his wand and jammed the tip of it into Draco's throat, which hurt quite a lot. "*FINITE INCANTATUM!*" said the Dark Lord.

For a moment, nothing happened, and Draco was sure the spell hadn't worked. Then the sensation of melting that he remembered washed over him again, accompanied by pain that tore through his nerves like a flight of tiny arrows. It was as if his own skin

were being ripped away, his bones melted and reformed. He doubled up and fell to the ground on all fours, gasping, his vision blurring with pain.

He seemed to see his own body from a long way away, he saw himself changing. And he saw the narrow cord of light that stretched between himself and Harry snap like an overburdened fishing line. The vision of Harry he could see behind his inner lids spun away into the darkness -- and he was alone.

Draco sat up slowly, feeling the pain ebb away. His vision was still blurred...but that, he realized, was because he was still wearing Harry's glasses, which he no longer needed. He reached up to remove them, but his hands were shaking so badly that it took him three tries before he could get them off.

He looked up. His father and Voldemort were staring at him, Voldemort with curiosity and Lucius with an expression that said that all his worst nightmares had just come true in one horrible moment.

"Isn't that your son, Lucius?" the Dark Lord said.

Chapter Nine - Lucius & The Death Eaters

"Hello, Father," said Draco.

Lucius was still looking like someone had force-fed him a lemon that happened to be taped to an enormous brick. "*Draco?*"

"He really does look like you, Lucius," said Voldemort, giving Draco a cursory stare. "Especially around the eyes." He lifted his wand. "Pity I'll have to burn them out."

"My Lord," said Lucius desperately, turning to Voldemort. "Please believe me--" For a wild moment, Draco thought that his father was going to beg for his life. "Please believe me, I knew nothing of this."

"Strangely enough, I do believe you, Lucius," said Voldemort. "You have always been deeply stupid and it does not surprise me that you had no knowledge of your son's activities. But that does not change the fact that he is a traitor and must die."

"If I might make a suggestion, Master?" said Lucius.

"Father," Draco interjected.

Lucius ignored him.

"Make it quickly," said the Dark Lord.

"The Veritas curse," said Lucius delicately. "It is possible, even likely, that Draco has some knowledge of the whereabouts of the real Harry Potter...if this is a Polyjuice spell, he must have needed to keep him nearby...."

Voldemort smiled coldly. "An excellent idea." He took his wand out again and pointed it at Draco.

"Father--" said Draco again.

"*Veritas*," hissed the Dark Lord.

So for the second time in his life, the hooks sank into Draco's chest and split it open, and he choked with pain and with the horror of being so exposed. It was even worse this time, maybe because this time he was resisting. It was no use, though. Whatever he meant to say when he opened his mouth, he knew the truth would come out instead.

Voldemort started simple. "What is your name, boy?"

"Draco Thomas Malfoy."

"After me, Lucius?" said Voldemort, "I had almost forgotten. How quaint."

Lucius simpered.

"Where is Harry Potter?"

Draco bit his lip hard. But it was no use. "I don't know," he heard himself say. That was a relief, at any rate. The cord that had bound him to Harry had snapped with the spell's dissolution; he no longer had any idea where Harry might be.

"Why did you take on his appearance and pretend to be him?"

"My father was going to kill Hermione," said Draco. "I couldn't let that happen."

Lucius looked surprised. "Was she really your girlfriend?"

"No," said Draco. "She wasn't. She's Harry's best friend. "

"And you felt the need to risk you own life for the life of someone else's best friend?" asked the Dark Lord. "Why?"

"I love her," said Draco, and felt himself go scarlet. He would have thought he would have been beyond humiliation, but apparently not.

"My, how embarrassing," said Voldemort, but he looked faintly amused. "Why don't you tell us, young Malfoy, how you came to be in this house, with Harry Potter's best friend, whom you... *love*, and Harry himself, presumably disguised as you?"

"No," said Draco, fighting to get up on his hands and knees. There was something wet on his face; when he reached up to rub it off, his hand came away red. Blood. He had bitten through his lip. "No."

But he couldn't get up. The pain in his chest was too intense, the feeling of being split open too strong. He fell back to the ground.

"Father," he heard himself say, and winced at how childish he sounded, "Father, *please*."

Lucius stirred uneasily. "Perhaps you should hit him with the spell again, Master?" he said.

"Indeed," said Voldemort, and did.

They were nearly at the base of the stairs that led up to the drawing-room when Harry gave an almighty yell and pitched forward onto the ground. Hermione whirled around in surprise.

"Harry!" she called. "Are you all right...?"

His response was muffled. He seemed to be bent over as if in pain, an unhappy black lump huddled on the ground with his hands over his face. She went towards him and he raised his head. "Hermione? Is that you?"

She was about to respond impatiently when the light from her wand fell on his face, and her retort turned into a half-scream. She clapped a hand over her mouth and stared. "Harry...." she breathed. "It's *you*."

"Of course it's me," he said irritably. "Were you hoping it was Lucius? Never mind, don't answer that."

"Shut up," she said, "I'm serious, Harry, it's really *you*...you're back, you understand?"

And he was. Untidy black hair, green eyes, lightning-shaped scar and all. He dropped his hands from his face and gave her a half-smile. "I kind of figured that," he said. "On account of the horrible pain and the fact that I can't see anything."

Hermione couldn't stop staring at him. It was so strange to see his face as his face again; his familiar features once again animated by the intelligence that lived there and belonged there. There was a moment of awkward silence as she gawked at him. Finally, she said, "It doesn't still hurt, does it?"

He shook his head. "No, but..." He trailed off. "I wish I could *see*."

She knelt down next to him. "I can fix your eyes, Harry. Do you want me to?"

For a moment he was silent, biting his lip. Then, reluctantly, he said, "I guess you'd better."

She knew why Harry had never let her or anyone else fix his eyesight with magic before: his glasses had become something of a trademark Harry Potter symbol, whether he liked it or not, and if he'd ever gotten rid of them Witch Weekly would have had a field day. They'd already done stories on how he cut his hair (in the bathroom, by himself, with nail scissors) and where he got his clothes ("I just let Hagrid pick them out for me.") If he got rid of his glasses, it would have meant headlines like HARRY POTTER TOO VAIN FOR GLASSES; IS THE BOY WHO LIVED GETTING A BIG HEAD? and Harry hated that sort of thing.

"It'll just be temporary," she said gently. "A Correctivity Charm. Until we get your glasses."

"It's all right," he said, and closed his eyes.

Hermione took her wand out and touched the tip of it gently to each of his eyelids. Then she leaned forward and put her fingers against his temples. "Stay still," she advised, and he took hold of her wrists to steady himself. "*Oculus*," she said.

Harry jumped as if he'd been stung, and opened his eyes. Then a reluctant grin spread over his face. "Hey," he said. "Thanks, Hermione."

It was only about fifteen minutes, but to Draco it seemed like several hours before Voldemort was finished with him. He'd managed to detach himself, and heard his own voice speaking as if from a long distance away, telling his father and the Dark Lord everything --- from the first moment he had taken on Harry's appearance to his belief that Harry was now in the dungeons, rescuing Sirius.

Eventually, when he had no more to tell, the Dark Lord took the Veritas curse off him. The relief was intense, but so was the sickening feeling of guilt.

"So," he heard his father saying, "Perhaps we should seek the Potter boy in the chambers under the house, Master?"

"No need," said Voldemort, looking pleased. "We must only wait. Harry Potter will come to us. He will come for your son."

Lucius Malfoy looked doubtful. "But my Lord...they are not even friends, Draco said as much..."

Voldemort shook his head. "I *know* Harry Potter," he said. "He is just like his father. He will come for your son, Lucius. I guarantee it."

When they came up into the drawing room, Sirius was waiting for them in his canine form. Harry opened his mouth to say something, but Sirius shook his head quickly and indicated that they should follow him. They padded after him down the hallways to Lucius' study, the door of which Sirius opened with a paw, and went in.

Narcissa was sitting behind Lucius' desk, just as she had been when Sirius had found her there, only her head was on her arms and she was crying.

Sirius turned back into a man so quickly that there was an audible *pop as he did so. He indicated Narcissa with a jerk of his chin. "I had to tell her everything," he said to Harry and Hermione in an undertone. "She's really upset." He glanced at Harry. "Turned back, have you? I thought you might've."

Harry looked surprised. "Why'd you think that?"

Sirius toed the ground, looking deeply unhappy. "Voldemort's already come," he said, looking anxiously at Hermione as he did so. "He went to find Harry..." Sirius sighed. "Well, I mean, he would have known right away that Draco wasn't you, wouldn't he? He probably took the spell off."

Hermione looked shocked and worried; Harry, however, showed no surprise, only resignation. "I thought that might have happened," he said quietly. "My scar's been hurting now for about an hour."

Hermione was furious. "Why didn't you *tell* me?" she demanded.

Harry shot her an irritable look, and she recalled that an hour ago, she and Harry had been kissing in the dungeons, after which she had told him off with great vehemence. It probably hadn't seemed to him like the right time to mention that his scar hurt. "Oh," she said, going red. "Sorry."

Harry turned back to Sirius. "Do you think Draco's all right?" He shot an anxious glance at Narcissa and dropped his voice. "Do you think he's alive?"

Sirius shrugged. "Don't know. The Dark Lord might have killed him in a fit of rage. Then again, Draco is the son of his closest and most powerful Death Eater. If Draco can convince them that he was acting under the influence of the Polyjuice spell...if he gives the Dark Lord information about *you*..."

"He wouldn't *do* that," Hermione interjected sharply.

"Maybe not," said Sirius cautiously. But neither Sirius nor Harry would look at her.

"Is Narcissa going to be all right?" Harry asked finally, breaking the silence.

"I hope so," said Sirius guardedly. "Lucius..." He said the name with immense hatred. "Lucius has had her under all sorts of spells and charms for so long -- Coercion Charms, the Imperius Curse sometimes, she's forbidden to have a wand, forbidden to lie to him, forbidden by pain of death even to speak Lucius' full name in case she uses it in an spell."

Hermione shook her head. "Wouldn't it just have been easier for Lucius to marry someone who actually liked him?" she wondered aloud.

"Men like Lucius don't do things because they are easy," said Sirius bitterly. "They do them because they want to show how powerful they are. Lucius wanted to marry the most beautiful girl in school. And he did."

"He should be in Azkaban," said Hermione angrily.

"And we should be rescuing Draco," said Harry.

Hermione shuddered.

"I'm going to have to go face him," said Harry, looking grim.

"And do *what*, Harry?"

"I'll trade," said Harry, "I'll trade myself for Draco."

"Oh, yeah," said Hemrione angrily, "because Voldemort is *so* known for keeping his word."

"I think what Hermione means," said Sirius, "is that he'll just kill you anyway. In fact, I'm sure he's expecting you to do just what you suggested."

"Well, we can't leave him to Lucius and Voldemort," protested Harry. " And the Death Eaters."

"The Death Eaters are not with them," said a faint voice. It was Narcissa, now sitting up and wiping at her eyes. "They're in the downstairs ballroom, trying to get the Lacertus Curse prepared."

Sirius went over and sat down next to Narcissa and put a hand on her shoulder. "It's all right," he said, "He'll be fine." But he didn't sound particularly convinced of this.

Harry looked over at Hermione for help, but she was looking extremely thoughtful. She walked over to the opposite side of the room and took down a fat green book from a shelf -- *Epicyclical Elaborations of Sorcery*.

Sirius turned around and looked at her. "Hermione, what are you doing?"

"Shush," said Harry, and put his finger to his lips. "Let her."

Hermione began flipping quickly through the pages. "I just thought....maybe...if we could make it work.... It would be..."

Sirius looked confused. Even Narcissa looked confused. But Harry just stood and watched her reading and tried to be quiet. Finally she put the book down and turned to Sirius. "I have an idea," she said.

Sirius looked doubtful.

"This is a good thing," Harry reassured him. "Hermione has great ideas."

"But I'll need your help, Narcissa," Hermione added.

Now even Harry looked doubtful. But Narcissa straightened up in her chair. "What can I do?" she said.

Voldemort ordered Lucius to watch his son, then crossed the room and stood by the window, looking out. This effectively left Draco and his father alone together. If Draco had expected Lucius to be apologetic about the horror that was being inflicted on his son, he was disappointed. He merely looked Draco up and down coldly, and said, "You have saddened me, boy."

Despite himself, Draco was almost impressed with his father's total lack of remorse. It was breathtaking. "Maybe you should ground me," he suggested.

Lucius frowned. "And your flip sense of humor is not helping your case," he said. "If you behave in a properly remorseful manner, the Dark Lord may forgive you. He had high hopes for you at one point, Draco. He *can* be merciful. And if you were truly acting under the influence of this Polyjuice spell..."

Draco shook his head. "I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you again, Father," he said. "No desire to join up with the Dark Lord here. I'm afraid I can't see what you see in him. Not the most stable guy. Not the handsomest bloke, either," he added, as an afterthought.

"I don't know what you hope to accomplish by defying me, Draco," said Lucius, sounding as aggrieved as an ordinary parent discovering that his teenage son has borrowed the car and plowed it into a snow bank.

"If you don't know that, Father," said Draco coldly, "than I'm not going to explain."

"And if you don't stop defying me," said Lucius even more coldly, "I won't be your father any more."

After that they sat in silence.

Harry, Hermione and Sirius sat nervously in the study, not looking at each other. Narcissa had been gone five minutes. When the door finally opened and Narcissa came back into the room, carrying a large bundled object, Sirius was so pleased that he turned back into a dog, then back into a man, then into a dog again in quick succession.

"Hang on there, Sirius," said Harry, although he was obviously relieved as well. "Too much excitement, not good for you."

Narcissa put the bundle down on the desk and stepped back as Harry, Hermione and Sirius (back to human form again) crowded around. "I told them I was taking it to Lucius," she said, sounding almost pleased. "The more I resist, the easier it gets," she went on. "I feel like I could almost say *his* name now."

Harry, Hermione and Sirius stepped back quickly.

"But I won't," she added.

Hermione scooted back to the desk and unwrapped the bundle, then sucked in her breath. A huge metal arm lay outstretched in front of her, grim and ugly and horrible. Each of its seven metal fingers ended in vicious blades and there were grotesque Dark-magic carvings all up and down its hollow metal body. Despite being hollow all through the inside, it looked extremely solid and heavy.

Harry was staring at it, revolted. "Is that the Lacertus arm?"

"It's horrible, isn't it?" said Hermione, nodding.

"It's a good thing he's not going to wind up using that thing it on Draco after all," said Harry. "There's no way you could get Draco to wear something that looked like that. Well," he added, with the ghost of a grin, "maybe if you told him it was Armani."

"Oh, shut up Harry," said Hermione absently. "We only have a couple minutes with this thing before Narcissa has to take it to You-Know-Who. Let me work on it."

While Hermione worked, Sirius drew Narcissa into the corner of the room. "You've done very well, very well," he told her. "We know it's hard for you--"

"I'm doing this for Draco," she said, a little sharply.

"I know," said Sirius.

"And when this is all over," said Narcissa, "you know I'll have to stay here, don't you? I don't dare leave. Not while Draco's father has that pendant."

"But won't Lucius already think--"

Narcissa shook her head. "He'll never think I've acted against him, not by my own will, not after seventeen years. But if I left with you--"

Sirius looked unhappy. "I understand."

Narcissa smiled. It was the first time he had seen her smile in eighteen years. It reminded him of his childhood. "It'll be all right, Sirius," she said.

"Yeah," he said. "Maybe."

If he hadn't hurt so much all over his body, Draco might well have fallen asleep where he lay, on the ground in the fencing room. He was exhausted. He hardly even heard the door open as Narcissa came into the room.

She went up to Lucius. "They wanted me to bring you this," she said, and unceremoniously handed him the Lacertus arm.

Lucius looked astonished. "What--why?"

"Harry Potter is in the house," said Narcissa, with perfect truth. "He is coming up here now."

This woke Draco up. He bolted upright and stared at his mother, who didn't look back at him. Something odd was going on, he was fairly sure of that. It didn't seem likely to him that the Death Eaters would have asked Narcissa to bring such a powerful and important magical object up to Lucius without them. Not unless they had a reason she wasn't stating.

Lucius was obviously suspicious as well, but didn't want to say anything in front of Voldemort. He had already shown once today that he couldn't control his own family,

and likely wasn't keen on making that point again. Instead, he lifted his left arm to his face and spoke into the Dark Mark: "*Wormtail. MacNair. Come. Bring them all.*"

Instantly, all over the room, Death Eaters began to Apparate: Wormtail, MacNair, Zabini, Rozier, Parkinson, and many others. People Draco had known since he was a child, had visited, whose children he had played with. None of them looked at him, sitting bloody and wretched-looking on the floor.

Voldemort turned from the window. "Harry Potter is here," he said, flexing his long fingers. "He is outside this room."

His voice lashed the Death Eaters like a whip. They stood to attention, staring around them. Draco saw Narcissa back out of the group quietly and leave the room through the back entrance.

There were footsteps in the hallways, clearly audible. The double doors opened. First one, then the other. Draco was gripping his hands together tightly, although he didn't realize it.

Sirius came in, in the form of a dog. There was total silence. Hermione followed him, looking very pale and unhappy. And after Hermione --- came Harry.

A sort of sigh rippled through the Death Eaters, like wind in branches.

Harry was even paler than Hermione, a sort of ashy white color, but he looked resolute. He wasn't wearing his glasses, which had the effect of making him look younger than he was. There was dried blood on his hand, still, and on his robes --- some of his own, and some of Draco's.

"I'm here," he said.

Voldemort stood in the center of his circle of Death Eaters and laughed. "And I know why," he said. "You have come for him," and he pointed at Draco.

"Yes," said Harry.

"He isn't worth it, Harry Potter," said Voldemort. "What do you think he has been doing here all morning while you were busy rescuing your canine companion? He has been telling us everything. Ever since I ended the spell that bound you two -- and I really must find out how that was done, it was most ingenious -he has been singing quite an interesting song."

"I don't believe it!" snapped Hermione. "You're lying! You could have figured out Harry was here without Draco saying anything at all!"

Voldemort turned his poisonous gaze on her. "You must have enjoyed your little interlude with young Malfoy in the wardrobe a great deal," he said, "to defend him so staunchly."

Color flooded Hermione's face. Draco tried to catch her eye, but she wouldn't look at him. "Then--then you tortured him," she said, but more uncertainly.

"I cannot imagine why I would wish to torture him for the information that he spent a sordid half an hour in a wardrobe with a stupid girl," said the Dark Lord. "No. He told me willingly, told me *everything*."

Hermione said nothing, but tears had begun to flood silently down her face.

"It hardly matters, in any case," said Voldemort, turning back to Harry. "I hold all the cards, you hold none. I would hardly believe you could be so irredeemably stupid as to come here thinking you could fight me. Only I knew your father, boy...and it is just the sort of thing he would have done. More stupid than brave, the both of you."

Harry held up his wand. "I have this," he said. "You don't dare duel with me while I have this."

"No," Voldemort agreed, and snapped his fingers. Ropes sprang out of the air and wrapped themselves tightly around Harry, binding his wand arm to his body. Voldemort walked up to him, plucked the wand out of his hand, and threw it on the floor. "And now you don't have it any more." He stood up and looked thoughtfully at Sirius and Hermione. "I could kill your friends," he said softly into Harry's ear. "But it would be so much more fun to let you do it."

Harry said nothing, only looked at the Dark Lord with hatred.

Voldemort snapped his fingers again and the Lacertus flew out of Lucius' grasp and landed in his own outstretched hand. Despite being so thin, the Dark Lord was very strong. He spun the Lacertus in one hand as if it had been a baton, then lifted Harry's arm-- the one that was not bound to his side -and shoved the Lacertus down over his wrist as if it had been nothing more than an enormous, ill-fitting glove.

Harry screamed out loud. The ropes binding him fell away, and he crumpled to the ground, not yelling any more but writhing as if the arm were white-hot and burned him. Draco could see the metal rippling and twisting as if it were melting, fitting itself to Harry's own flesh, spreading white-metal tendrils all up and down his arm like vicious bracelets.

Draco clapped his own hand to his arm in sympathetic pain. He didn't know he was doing it, but he did it just the same.

Finally Harry sat up. And even the Death Eaters gasped. Harry's arm had become a thing of metal and blades and ugly death. The silver of the Lacertus arm had spread far enough over his body to grip the left side of his chest. There was a sort of halo of black light around him --- a reverse-halo, glimmering and dark. His skin glowed white under its negative light; his eyes glittered like emeralds. He looked inhuman.

Draco heard Hermione choke on a dry sort of sob.

"Harry," said the Dark Lord in a purring sort of voice. "What are you?"

"I am nothing," said Harry, in an odd, distant voice. "I am yours."

The Dark Lord grinned and turned to Lucius. "I'm not sure we even need the Imperius Curse here," he said. "But better safe than sorry."

He raised his wand, pointed it at Harry. "*Imperio!*"

Harry bent his head as the jet of green light struck him. When he raised it again, his eyes looked even more unfocused.

"Now," said Voldemort. "Now. Harry, turn the Arm on...her." He pointed at Hermione. "Your little girlfriend. Go ahead. Do it."

Harry turned. He raised the arm, whose metal blade-fingers were closed into a fist, and pointed it at Hermione, who stared at him with wide-open eyes. Then he said:

"And you said *I* was stupid."

He whirled around again, and this time the Lacertus was pointing straight at Voldemort and the little knot of Death Eaters gathered around him. He started to walk towards them, slowly, as if it took great effort. They all gaped at him.

"You *know* the Imperius curse doesn't work on me," said Harry. "And you should know better than to arm your enemy with a deadly weapon."

"It is hardly deadly to *me*," said Voldemort sharply. "You idiotic boy."

"Maybe," said Harry. "Maybe not."

And he opened his hand.

The silver blades whirled apart, and from his metal palm erupted a jet of bluish light. Its force was so great that Harry staggered backward. Draco threw himself to the ground as a tongue of blue fire whipped over his head, striking the far wall and knocking over a display case of antique swords, which rained down with a clatter.

Harry fell on his knees, but he was still directing the light towards Lucius and the Death Eaters. Draco saw the light strike first one, then the rest of the Death Eaters and heard them scream as it whipped around them like Voldemort's ropes had whipped around Harry. One by one, they were jerked off their feet, Lucius included -- they howled, and vanished.

Voldemort was the last to go. He seemed to be hanging on just from the sheer force of his hatred of Harry. But Harry raised his arm and pointed it again at the Dark Lord, and he, too, was whirled away.

The blue light vanished with him. And Harry crumpled to the ground as if he had been shot.

Draco struggled to his feet and started to run over to Harry. Hermione got there before he did, though, and flung herself down next to him. He looked like he was out cold. She grabbed hold of the ugly metal arm and began running her wand frantically over it.

Draco reached over to help steady Harry's arm, but Hermione, looking white and desperate, snapped, "*Don't touch him!*"

Draco jerked his hand back.

There was a flash of white light from the tip of Hermione's wand, and the metal Lacertus arm vanished. Harry began to stir.

Hermione's shoulders sagged in relief. "I'm sorry," she said quietly, not looking at Draco. "It's just -- the arm was draining his strength, it would have killed him in a minute. I had to get it off him."

"That *wasn't* the Lacertus curse," said Draco flatly. Why wouldn't she look at him?

"No," said Hermione, still looking down at Harry. "No. We changed it. But the arm is was still a very dangerous Transfigured object, and using it could easily have killed him."

A large tear ran down her nose and plonked onto Harry's face. Harry opened his eyes.

"Quit that," he said hoarsely.

Hermione grinned at him. Harry grinned back.

"You were amazing, Harry," she said. "You really were."

Sirius, who had come loping up, sat down by Harry and grabbed his hand. "That *was* fantastic," he said. "Really fantastic, Harry, congratulations."

Harry sat up slowly. He was still very pale, but color was beginning to come back to his face. "We still have to get out of here, though, don't we," he said matter-of-factly. "Hermione, you said the spell wasn't permanent?"

She shook her head. "It was just a very strong Whirlwind Charm in place of the killing spell the Lacertus usually uses," she said. "It won't kill them at all -- but it'll keep them away for a good long time. And eventually it'll dump them down somewhere random. I hope it dumps Voldemort into the piranha tank at the zoo," she added angrily.

Draco thought he should say something, but wasn't sure what. He probably ought to thank Harry for saving his life. But Harry and Hermione were busy grinning at each other like idiots, and then there was Sirius, whacking Harry on the back and treating him like he was some sort of hero. Well okay, Draco admitted, Harry *was* kind of a hero. Although of course he wouldn't have been in a position to need his life saved if

he hadn't been pretending he was Harry in the first place, in order to save Hermione's life. For which she had not thanked him. In fact, she hadn't even acknowledged it.

Feelings he thought he had forgotten, left behind, came flooding back. Jealousy and rage and gnawing fear. Neither Harry nor Hermione would look at him -- they thought he had betrayed them -- they were disgusted with him--

"Potter," he said shortly. He reached into his pocket, took out Harry's glasses, and dropped them onto Harry's lap. "Your specs."

Harry glanced up. "Thanks, Malfoy," he said. But his eyes were wary.

This only increased Draco's anger. "Go on," he said. "Ask me."

"Ask you what?" said Harry, looking even warier now.

"If Voldemort tortured me to get me to tell him where you were," Draco said. "You've been wondering. So ask."

"Don't," said Hermione sharply. But neither of them was listening to her. They were looking at each other, green eyes locked on gray.

"Well," said Harry. "Did he?"

"No," said Draco.

There was a long silence.

Draco said, "You saved my life, Potter." He jerked his chin toward Hermione. "But I saved *her* life. Which in my mind makes us even."

There was another silence.

"Fine," said Harry at last. "We're even."

Hermione looked from one of them to the other. Harry was still pale and shaking, but Draco looked as calm and collected as though he'd just been through nothing worse than a bad haircut; although his face and clothes were still very bloody.

"Draco," she began, but he didn't even look at her.

"I don't want to hear from you, Granger," he said shortly.

Draco bent down and picked up his wand from the floor where it had fallen. Then he straightened up and jammed it into his pocket -- he was still wearing Harry's clothes, frayed robes and all. He didn't look at Hermione as he did all this, didn't see her face wretched with misery. "See you at school, then," he said and walked away.

Hermione seized Harry's arm. "Harry---he *can't* go---"

Harry just looked tired. "Let him go if he wants to, Hermione."

She shook her head violently. "We'll never get off the grounds without him -- there are seventeen hexes on the front door alone and only he knows how to take them off--"

Harry turned to Sirius. "Get him," he said.

Sirius dropped down into canine form and leaped after Draco. He lunged onto his back and brought him crashing to the floor. Draco rolled over, yelling, and Sirius sat on his chest. Harry got to his feet and, followed by Hermione, approached them slowly.

"Call off your dog, would you, Potter?" said Draco, eyeing Sirius with immense dislike. "I *hate* dogs."

"You want to be a bit nicer to someone who's just helped save your life," said Harry.

"I thought we were even," replied Draco.

"I didn't mean me," said Harry. "I meant Sirius."

"Oh, shut up, both of you," Hermione interrupted in great agitation. "We need to *go*. Draco -- you have to come with us, we'll never get off the grounds without you."

"And this is my problem because...?"

Draco's drawl was back. The drawl Hermione remembered, that she hated.

Sirius suddenly resumed his human form, stood up, and yanked Draco sharply to his feet. "I'll tell you why it's your problem, my boy," he said, and snapped his fingers. Narrow ropes appeared out of the air as they had for Voldemort earlier and whipped themselves around Draco's left arm, binding it tightly to Sirius' right one. Before Draco could react, Sirius had reached out, plucked his wand out of his robes, and pocketed it. "Because I'm making it your problem."

Draco looked so angry that his eyes were nearly black with fury. Then he grinned at Harry and Hermione. It was a mean, mirthless sort of grin. "If that's the way you want to play it," he said, "Fine."

"Why won't you just come with us because you *want* to?" demanded Hermione, her voice cracking. "We haven't done *anything* but try to help you--"

"My father says he isn't my father any more," said Draco. "The Dark Lord wants me dead, and when I get back to school, I'll probably be expelled. If the point of this all was to show me how miserable it is being *you*, Potter, then it worked."

Harry's eyes flashed with anger. "None of this was about *you*, Malfoy, in the first place."

Draco looked like he had been hoping Harry would say that. "Of course not," he sneered. "Because everything's about you, isn't it, Potter? None of our lives would have been in danger if it wasn't for *you*."

"Harry can't help being who he is," said Hermione in a trembling voice.

"Maybe not," said Draco, "But he could help dragging his friends into his messes over and over again. What're you going to do, Potter, when you slip up and one of them dies? It's just a matter of time, the only question is whether it'll be Weasley, or the Dog Man here, or even Granger--"

"Shut up, Malfoy," said Harry in a deadly voice.

"I don't think Granger needs a lot of encouragement to die for you, either," Draco went on, eyes glittering, "I heard you down in the tunnels, you two: *Say it, Harry, say it--*"

"*Shut up!*" screamed Hermione, and Draco laughed.

"He's just trying to make us angry enough so we'll let him go off without us," said Harry in the same deadly voice. "Well, it won't work."

And he walked away. Halfway to the doors, he stopped, bent down, and picked up one of the swords that had fallen out of the smashed display case. He slid it through his belt, and turned and looked at the other three. "We're going," he said. "Now."

It was going on midnight, and the sky over Malfoy Manor was an inverted black bowl spangled with sequins. The grounds were black and silver and deadly. Of course, if they hadn't had Draco with them, they would have been terminally deadly. Bitter and vindictive he might be, but he was still a Malfoy, and knew how to get around the grounds.

Sirius walked ahead, pushing Draco slightly in front of him. Harry and Hermione followed behind. Harry was quiet with the quiet of exhaustion. They skirted a number of obstacles, including a nest of giant spiders which Draco pointed out and Sirius promptly Stunned with his wand.

Hermione was feeling wretched. It wasn't just that they were on the Malfoy family grounds, which was terrifying, or that Harry was still looking white and ill and she was afraid that the Lacertus charm, even in its altered form, had done him a lasting injury of some sort -- it was also that Draco wasn't talking to her.

She had *wanted* to thank him for having saved her life, but she couldn't, because he wouldn't talk to her. When she tried to approach him he waved her away. In fact he had only spoken to any of them once, to ask if Narcissa was all right. None of them had the heart to tell him about the Epicyclical Charm, even now, so Sirius hadn't been able to give him much of an answer besides his word that Narcissa was fine. This, of course, only pissed Draco off further.

Hermione kept sneaking glances at Draco out of the corner of her eye. How could she have been so *wrong* about anyone? She had been sure, positive, that it wasn't the Polyjuice spell, it *couldn't* be the Polyjuice spell...but the way he had looked at her, talked to her, back in the fencing room, it was as if the past week had never happened and he hated her again.

They had come to a low bridge over a narrow stream. Draco stopped dead. Harry, who hadn't been paying attention, was about to step on the bridge when Draco reached out a hand and caught at his sleeve.

"I wouldn't walk on that if I were you, Potter," he drawled.

Harry stepped back quickly and looked at Draco with suspicion. "Why? What'll happen?"

"Standard procedure," said Draco, "is to leap fifty feet into the air and scatter yourself over a wide area while screaming at the top of your lungs."

Harry looked at him, and Draco grinned his obnoxious grin again. For a moment, it looked like Harry might haul off and punch him in the eye. Draco kind of hoped he would, but was disappointed.

"Right," said Harry, taking a deep breath. "So it's a bomb, then."

"I wouldn't know what you'd call it," Draco replied, looking bored. "I don't speak Muggle."

"It's some sort of Explosive Hex, let's just go around it, Harry," said Hermione, looking terribly unhappy.

"No," said Harry, still regarding the bridge thoughtfully. "Give him his wand, Sirius."

Sirius looked doubtful. "Harry--"

"Give it to him," said Harry. He turned and looked at Draco. "Take the hex off, Malfoy."

"And if I don't?"

"Then we'll all walk onto it and take our chances," said Harry. "You can go first."

Draco frowned. Sirius took his wand out and pressed it roughly into Draco's grip, keeping his own hand firmly on his wrist.

Draco pointed his wand at the bridge. "*Raptus regaliter*," he said.

There was a sharp flash of light. Sirius took the wand back and they walked out onto the bridge, Sirius pushing Draco ahead of him. Nothing happened, so Harry and Hermione followed.

Sirius had said almost nothing to Draco since he had told him that getting off the grounds was now his problem too. Now, however, he turned to him and said, "What did they use on you, boy? Veritaserum?"

Caught off guard, Draco stumbled. "What?"

"I saw your face when we came into that room, and again just now when Harry almost walked on that bridge," said Sirius. "You wouldn't have told Lucius bloody anything, you're much too proud for starters. You forget, I was around back in the day when Voldemort was going around torturing people and using Veritaserum like it

was Pepperup Potion. I know what resisting Dark magic looks like." He grabbed Draco's chin and forced his head up. "Bit through your lip, didn't you?" he added, sounding approving. "Very good."

Draco wrenched his head away. "What's it to you?"

"Not much," Sirius admitted. "But it might mean a lot to them," and he gestured towards Harry and Hermione behind them on the path.

"They wouldn't believe me."

"Try them," suggested Sirius.

"No," said Draco. "They were so ready to believe that as soon as the spell was off me, I'd turn right around and stab them in the back," he added with intense bitterness. "Hermione looked like she was going to spit on me. They didn't even *ask*."

"You didn't exactly offer, either."

"If I was Harry," snapped Draco, "she wouldn't have to ask, she'd know."

"You're not Harry," said Sirius with brutal honesty. "Not any more."

Draco jerked his head aside so that Sirius couldn't see his face. "Harry the hero," he said in a tight voice. "He gets to walk home with Hermione, and I wind up chained to the Dog Man."

"Take a word of advice from the Dog Man, then," said Sirius. "You're not doing a lot to further your own cause at the moment. Just tell them the truth, Malfoy."

"I'm not sure I'm a Malfoy any more," said Draco. "And I'm not Harry either. I don't know what I am."

Hermione had begun to lose track of time when she heard Harry give a sudden whistle of amazement. She glanced up and saw what he was looking at -- a huge chasm that bisected the ground in front of them. It was narrow, possibly no more than thirty feet

across, but it looked very, very deep. It wound back and forth across the barren ground like an uncoiling serpent. There was obviously no way around it.

"It's a bottomless pit," said Draco, looking at it with some uneasiness. "Or it might be a Depthless Chasm, I'm not certain. No...I'm pretty sure my father did say that he'd asked the landscaper for a Bottomless Pit." Draco shrugged. "Either way, I wouldn't recommend falling into it. It might have no bottom, but you'll be falling a long time."

"Trust your family to have a Bottomless Pit, Malfoy," said Harry darkly. "Other people have shrubbery in the garden. You have a Bottomless Pit."

"More unusual than shrubbery," said Draco. "Handier, too."

"Enough bickering," said Sirius sharply. "How do we get across?"

"You can't," said Draco, "If you were a Malfoy, you could walk over the chasm without a bridge. But you don't." He cocked his head at Harry. "Well, maybe *you* do, Potter, care to chance it?"

Harry shook his head fervently. "No way."

"Of course," Draco added, "if I had my *wand*...."

Sirius handed it to him and held his wrist while he performed a spell. There was no flash of light, but a bridge appeared -- more of a narrow walkway, really, that hugged the side of the chasm. It was barely wide enough for two people to walk side by side.

"I don't much like the look of that," said Sirius.

Draco shrugged. "It's what we use when we have to get across with someone who isn't a Malfoy," he said. "It's safe enough. It crosses the Pit farther down."

"You first," said Harry to Draco, and they went.

They were about halfway across, walking two by two along the narrow path, when they heard it. A sort of whirring, thrumming noise directly overhead. Hermione glanced up, trying to see past the ten feet or so of cliff that stretched above them, and saw that the others were doing the same.

"What *is* that?" she said.

They all glanced at Draco, who looked baffled. "No idea," he said shortly.

"Get back against the cliff wall, everyone," said Sirius sharply, and they pressed themselves into the shadow of the rock. After a few minutes, the noise died away and they started walking again, although more slowly.

"That sounded almost like...a helicopter," said Harry under his breath to Hermione. "But it can't be. Not here."

"It wouldn't work," she agreed. "Too much magic in the air."

"Some sort of flying monster?" said Harry worriedly.

"It didn't *sound* like any kind of animal--"

She broke off as the whirring, grinding noise came whirling overhead again, this time accompanied by a flash of intensely bright light. Whatever it was had circled around and returned. They huddled back against the cliff. Then something suddenly soared over their heads---something big--if Hermione hadn't known better, she would have thought it *was* a helicopter or a plane, but it couldn't be---

"Get back here," said Sirius roughly, and Hermione realized that he was talking to Draco, who had moved forward and was standing on the path, out of the shadows. The bright overhead glare turned his hair to the colorless color of lightning. He was doing something with his hands---but his left hand was tied... wasn't it?

"Sirius!" said Harry sharply. "He's got his wand--"

Sirius whipped around. Draco jumped back, furiously tugging at his wrists. Somehow, in the confusion, he had gotten his wand out of Sirius' pocket and freed himself. He yanked the last of the magical ropes from his wrists and dropped them on the ground. He had a very odd expression on his face --- half triumph, half despair.

"You can go on without me from here," he said, turned, and ran back the way they had come.

Sirius dropped to all fours in canine form and bolted after him.

Several things happened at once.

Draco, hearing Sirius behind him, skidded to a stop, whirled, and ran sideways - off the walkway and into thin air. He hadn't been lying, he could walk on the air above the chasm. His feet kicked up bright silver flashes as he ran, like a knife striking sparks from metal.

Sirius, obviously startled, gave a yelp of shock and began skidding to a halt.

Harry, seeing Sirius' distress, started to run forward. And suddenly stumbled, his foot tangled in Draco's discarded bindings. He pitched forward silently, rolled, and slid off the edge of the walkway, out of view.

Hermione's heart stopped.

"Harry!" she shrieked, running to the side of the walkway and casting about wildly. "*Harry!*"

"I'm here," said a faint voice directly below her. "But I think my arm is broken."

Hermione fell to her knees, crawled to the very edge of the path, and looked over. At first she saw only darkness, which resolved itself slowly into a pattern of shadow and lesser shadow. She made out Harry's white face, turned up to hers. He was gripping an outflung rock with one arm. His other arm hung at a strange angle at his side. His legs were dangling out over the chasm -- deep and black and endless.

"Harry," she breathed. She flung herself onto her stomach and inched forward until she could reach the hand that was gripping the rock. She seized him by the wrist and hung on tightly. "You're all right," she said frantically, "just hang on, Harry--" She turned her head, looking desperately for Sirius, saw him about thirty feet away, watching Draco running through the air to the opposite side of the chasm. "Sirius!" she screamed. "*Sirius, come quickly!*"

There was a loud cracking noise, and a piece of the rock Harry was gripping crumbled away. He skidded downward about two feet, pulling Hermione with him. She threw the arm that wasn't holding Harry around a rock and braced her knees. The gravel tore at her skin, but she stopped sliding forward.

She looked down at Harry again. There was nothing but her own strength keeping him from falling now, and she was gripping his wrist so tightly that she could see her nails digging into his flesh. "Hold on," she said, her voice cracking alarmingly, "just hold on, Harry, Sirius is coming--"

She could see Sirius loping towards them at top speed, racing with all four feet, and yet he didn't seem to be getting any closer at all.

"I can't," said Harry's voice below her.

She looked back at Harry. He was very pale, the dirt and gashes standing out clearly on his white face, but he seemed strangely calm. "I can't," he said again, and she saw that he was right, his hand was slipping out of hers-she lunged forward, she was hanging half off the path now -- and caught at his sleeve, seizing it in a death-tight grip.

"Harry," she said. "Harry, *please*."

But she knew it was useless. He couldn't pull himself up with his arm broken. He was dead weight on the end of her arm and her shoulder was agony now. She was aware of the whirring, grinding noise overhead again but she didn't dare look up.

"Hermione," said Harry.

He was smiling. How could he be smiling at a time like this?

"I do love you, you know," he said.

Or at least that was what it sounded like he said. The whirring noise was loud in her ears and she couldn't be sure.

"*What?*" gasped Hermione, numb with shock. "*What did you say?*"

Harry opened his mouth to reply. There was the sound of ripping cloth, and his sleeve came off in her hand, as it had to, as she had known it would. She saw his eyes widen in horror-- and then he was falling, falling away from her, spiraling down into the impenetrable darkness below.

Chapter Ten - Epicyclical Elaborations of Sorcery

Unconscious, Harry fell, and as he fell he dreamed. In his dream, he was at a garden-party at the Weasleys. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were there, and so were all the kids: Charlie, looking slightly burnt as usual, and Bill with Fleur Delacour, who he'd been dating for about a year now. Fred and George and Ron were playing Exploding Snap with Ginny at a green wicker table in the corner.

Draco Malfoy was there as well, standing under the shade of a spreading oak tree, wearing tennis whites and looking very pleased with himself. He was talking to a slender girl in a yellow dress and an enormous white hat.

Am I dead? Harry wondered. *Is this Heaven? And if this is Heaven, why is Malfoy here?*

The girl who had been talking to Draco suddenly turned, and Harry saw that it was Hermione. She came towards him across the grass, swinging a tennis racket. He recognized the yellow dress she was wearing from a summer holiday he'd spent with her and her parents. He'd always liked it. "Hi, Harry!" she called.

"Hermione," he said, coming towards her. "I think I'm falling."

"For me?" she said, looking thrilled.

"No, I mean, literally falling," he said. "Like, rushing through the air falling. In fact, I feel kind of sick."

The thrilled look was wiped off her face, to be replaced with a look of fury. "You are such an idiot, Harry Potter," she said, raised her arm, and hit him hard in the head with her tennis racket.

Harry yelled with pain. "What'd you do that for?" he shouted. "*Honestly!*"

"Hey!" said a voice in his ear--a voice that wasn't Hermione's. "Harry! Settle down!"

"Maybe the fall unhinged his mind," said another, worried voice.

"Harry?" said the first voice again, "Harry, come on, wake up," and this time Harry knew who it was. He opened his eyes and stared.

He was lying in the back seat of a car and Ron Weasley was crouched over him, looking very pale but grinning like a madman. George was in the driver's seat, and Fred was sitting next to him. Both of them had turned around in their seats to goggle at him, which might have been a problem if the car had been moving, but it wasn't because the car was just hanging there.

In midair.

Harry sat bolt upright. "What--what?" he stammered. "How? You? Here? Flying car?"

"That's right," agreed George. "Us. Here. Flying car."

"He seems to have an excellent grasp of the essentials, doesn't he?" observed Fred.

Harry tried again. "How did you--?"

"We caught you while you were falling," explained George enthusiastically. "It was the coolest thing ever."

"Good thing Dad upgraded to a convertible," added Ron.

"And I fixed your arm," put in Fred, twirling his wand like a baton. "No problem."

"But what are you doing here?" said Harry in amazement. "Don't tell me you were taking your dad's car for a midnight spin and you just happened to spot me toppling over a cliff."

"Not hardly," said Ron. "As to that..." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper, which he threw in Harry's lap. "I was going to be really pissed off at you," said Ron, "but since you've just fallen off a massive cliff, I'll give you a break."

Harry unfolded the paper wonderingly. It was a note, addressed to HARRY POTTER, and he had to scan it twice before the contents sank in. "It's the ransom note," he said, amazed. "The one Wormtail sent to me at school, telling me they had Sirius here." He looked at Ron in wonder. "How did you get hold of it?"

"Harry, you thundering great prat," said Ron in disgust. "I opened your mail, of course. What'd you think I was going to do? You and Hermione vanish, and then I get this mad note from her - remind me to show it to you- saying she's gone off with you on some sort of rescue mission and not to tell anyone. Well, naturally I knew something very bizarre was up, so when this nasty-looking black bird arrived the next day with a letter for you, of course I opened it."

"And a bloody good thing he did," interjected Fred.

"So I showed it to Fred and George right away, and we went rushing home and got Dad's new car that he bought with the money from the joke shop, which of course he'd enchanted to fly - and we blackmailed him by threatening to tell Mum, so he had to give it to us - and then we followed the instructions from the ransom note and came on here." Ron beamed. "And in the nick of time, I might add - we just managed to fly onto the grounds when we looked down, and there you were, dangling right off the edge of the cliff with Hermione holding on to you. It was a shock, I'll tell you. And then you let go and you fell, just hurtled down, mind, it was really terrifying, so George jammed on the accelerator and we rocketed straight down and swerved under you to catch you." Ron sighed in satisfaction. "It was better than the Wronski Feint."

Harry didn't share Ron's enthusiasm. Instead he put his hands over his face. "Oh," he moaned, "Hermione. Oh, no."

"You kept yelling for her while you were coming around," said George, in the tone of one imparting significant information.

"I had a dream she was hitting me with a tennis racket," muttered Harry between his fingers.

"Right," said Ron, who obviously did not believe him.

"We've got to get back to the path," said Harry anxiously. "Hermione and Sirius, they probably think I'm dead. And Malfoy--he ran off--"

"That reminds me of another question I had," said Ron. "There was a lot of stuff in Hermione's mad note about Malfoy - what on earth was she going on about, Harry?"

"Just bring the car back up," said Harry. "I'll explain on the way."

It took a little while for them to rise back up to the top of the Pit. On the way, Harry described the events of the past few days to the other occupants of the car. Fred and George were a very good audience, booing and cheering and yelling in all the right places. Ron, however, was a different matter.

"Hermione kissed Malfoy?" he demanded when Harry was done talking. "*Draco Malfoy?*"

"Just that once," said Harry. "That I know about," he added, crinkling his brow.

"Hermione kissed MALFOY?" Ron said again.

"Did I mention the big scary demon arm?" asked Harry.

"Yeah," said Ron, "But Hermione -"

"Oh, shut up, Ron, do," pleaded George. "You're giving me a headache."

"That's just not like her," said Ron in amazement. "I thought - I mean, you know - her and you," he said, and trailed off at the look on Harry's face. "Or not," he added hastily.

"We're here," said George, and indeed they were pulling level with the walkway. The Weasleys leaped out of the car, Harry, on legs that were still very wobbly, followed them.

At first it looked to them like there was only one person sitting on the path. Then, as they drew closer, they realized it was Sirius, holding Hermione, who was sobbing into his shoulder.

Hermione rarely cried, and Harry had never heard her cry like that. It was a horrible, lost, awful sound. He started forward but couldn't make his legs work right. He stumbled, and George caught him. "Easy there, Potter," he said, and Harry started to walk forward.

Hearing George, Sirius glanced up. His eyes widened when he saw Harry, and he grinned all over his face. Gently, he put his hands on Hermione's shoulders and pried her off him. "Uh, Hermione," he said. "*Hermione*," and he put his hand under her chin and turned her head.

Hermione followed his gaze and saw...

Ron?

She didn't even stop to think how Ron might have gotten there, just gasped once and leaped to her feet, flinging herself on him, sobbing hysterically into his shirt front. "Ron, oh Ron, Harry's dead, I'm so sorry, it's my fault, I really tried -"

Ron patted her head. "Dead, did you say?" he said, not sounding the least bit sad. "Well, it was bound to happen."

Hermione pulled back a little and looked up at him uncertainly. "What?"

"Well, he led such a risky sort of life," said Ron, ignoring the shocked look on her face, "Don't you think? I suppose the only thing for us to do is dedicate the rest of our lives to making sure the memory of Harry never fades from the recollection of the wizarding world. Perhaps a zonking great monument is the way to go. Some huge block of marble with a statue of our favorite midget in glasses right on top. We can get Fred and George to fund the construction." Seeing her expression, Ron relented and shut up. "Hermione, you great ninny," he said with a grin. "Look behind me."

She turned her head and saw Fred and George Weasley standing behind her, grinning like mad. And between them, looking very much the worse for wear, with his hair sticking up every which way and his glasses on crooked, but very much alive, was ... Harry.

Hermione's knees gave out, and she sat down hard on the ground.

A second later, Harry had shoved Ron (rather rudely) out of the way, and was sitting next to her on the ground. "Hermione," he breathed, putting his arms around her. "I'm sorry...I'm sorry...Ron's an idiot." He turned and glared at Ron. "Ron, you're an idiot!" Ron rolled his eyes. "I'm fine," Harry went on. "Don't cry."

But she wasn't really crying - more gasping in great, shuddering breaths as if she couldn't get enough air. Harry held her and she clung on to him, breathless, burying her head in his shoulder. Harry looked over her head at Ron and mouthed desperately: *What should I do?*

Ron mimed patting an invisible someone's head, which Harry did.

Hermione's gasps quieted somewhat.

The Weasley twins watched Harry and Hermione clutching on to each other as if the world were ending, and shook their heads.

George sighed. "Look at him," he said in an undertone, "he's got one of the great makeout lines of all time available to him - 'hey, I'm back from the dead' -and he doesn't use it."

"He's a cretin," agreed Fred.

"I'm glad he's alive, though," said Ron, who was listening.

"Me, too," said George. "We've got a match against Slytherin coming up next week and we'd be flattened without him."

Nobody wanted to hang out on the walkway where Harry had fallen (even if he was all right), especially not Hermione, so they got in the car and drove back up to the top of the cliff, where they parked in the middle of a grove of trees and Sirius made a rather startling announcement.

"We're not leaving," he said.

"Oh, right," said George. "We'll just hang around a bit, shall we, have a campfire. Toast some marshmallows. Wait for the Dark Lord to return and kill us all."

"We're not leaving," Sirius clarified, "without Draco."

"Come on, Sirius! " said Ron, sounding horrified. "For six years it's been my dream to leave Malfoy stranded on a horrible, barren plain full of giant spiders, and now I finally get the opportunity and you want to take it all away?"

"They're *his* giant spiders, Ron, they won't hurt him," pointed out Harry.

"Well, you can't have everything, can you?" said Ron.

"Sirius is right," said Hermione.

"Oh course, you would think so," snapped Ron. "You've been kissing Malfoy all over the place, after all, it's only natural you'd want to save his scaly hide. You--you bad girl, Hermione. You smoocher of evil."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Ron! *Honestly!*"

Sirius crossed his arms over his chest. "I am not leaving without Draco," he said again.

"Has he been kissing you, too?" asked George. "Gets around, Malfoy does."

Harry had turned and was looking away from them, back in the direction of the Manor. "He won't come, Sirius," he said.

"You'll have to believe me that it would be a very wrong thing to do, not to at least give him the chance," said Sirius.

"Wrong?" said Ron angrily. "First chance he got he turned right around and stabbed you all in the back, didn't he?"

"Only because Voldemort used the Veritas curse on him," said Sirius, sharply.

Harry and Hermione both started talking at the same time, and Sirius held up a hand.

"Draco didn't tell me," he said. "I guessed. And I wasn't going to tell you, because I figured it was his business, but you might as well know. And I'd like to see you, Ron," he said with a flash of anger in Ron's direction, "fight it as hard as he did."

Hermione and Harry looked at each other, with identical expressions of guilty horror. Then they turned back to Sirius. "Why didn't he tell us?" demanded Hermione. "He said Voldemort didn't torture him to get him to talk."

"The Veritas curse isn't torture," said Sirius. "Technically speaking."

"He's so *stubborn*," said Harry, angrily.

"Like someone else I could mention," said Sirius.

Harry looked at his shoes. "Go and get him, Sirius," he said.

"Be practical," protested George. "How're we meant to find him?"

Sirius tapped his nose. "You forget I'm a dog," he said. "I can follow his scent. Chase him down."

"That's kind of weird and disturbing," said Fred. "You know that, right?"

"But very effective," said Sirius. "You five wait here. I'll look for him for twenty minutes and no more. I've a feeling he hasn't gone far."

"I've got a question for you, Harry," said Ron. Harry and the Weasleys were crowded around the car, which was parked near the chasm edge. George had claimed the car was making a funny grinding noise, and he and Fred were messing about under the hood, trying to figure out what it was. The Weasleys had brought food with them, so Harry was currently stuffing a jam sandwich into his mouth, in between swigs of pumpkin juice.

"Yeah?" asked Harry, around a mouthful of sandwich.

"Are you ever going to tell Hermione how you feel about her?"

Harry choked on his pumpkin juice. "What?" He glanced around nervously. Hermione, saying she was exhausted, had retired with her sandwich and juice to the edge of the clearing, and was lying down in the grass some distance away.

"You heard me," said Ron. "You big stupid nitwit, it's written all over your face, are you ever going to say anything?"

Fred and George had come out from under the hood now, and were listening in with great interest.

Harry looked at his juice. "I did tell her," he said.

"When?" demanded Ron.

"When I was falling off the cliff," said Harry. "Just right before my sleeve came off. I told her I loved her."

"Way to do the exit line," said Fred, sounding deeply impressed.

"Yeah, it's almost too bad we saved you," added George, "her whole life, she'd never have forgotten you if that was the last thing you ever said to her."

"Right. That's how I want Hermione to remember me for the rest of her life," said Harry. "Bottomless Pit Guy."

"Better than Way Too Late Guy," said Ron. "Better than Just Stood Back Like A Prat And Watched Her Go Off With Malfoy Guy."

Harry upset his pumpkin juice. "You're not helping," he said. "Anyway, I'm not sure she even heard me."

"One way to find out, isn't there?" said Ron.

Sirius loped over the silvery-dark grounds swiftly, skirting anything that looked like it might be a nasty obstacle of some sort. Although he was fairly sure he was safe in dog form, he didn't want to run into anything that would slow him down.

His suspicions that Draco hadn't gone very far were confirmed as he neared a small stand of trees, shadowy and spectral in the darkness. Sirius turned back into a man and ducked under the outer branches.

Draco was sitting with his back to the trunk of a tree. His legs were drawn up, his head on his knees. He reminded Sirius oddly of Narcissa, perhaps because he looked so vulnerable, and his hair, like hers, was white-silver in the moonlight.

As Sirius approached him, Draco's arm shot out, holding his wand. He directed it at Sirius and said, "Don't come any closer."

"It's me," said Sirius calmly.

"I know who it is," said Draco, raising his head. "And I said not to come any closer."

Sirius reached into his pocket, drew out his own wand, and laid it on the ground. Draco watched him warily.

"You have great reflexes," said Sirius, straightening up. "You're on the Slytherin house team, aren't you? What position do you play?"

"Seeker," said Draco.

"You should be a Beater," said Sirius. "You're quite strong, as well."

"You're the second person who's told me that in the past two days," said Draco in a monotone. "Why are you here, anyway? You didn't chase me down to talk about sports."

Sirius sat down and leaned his back against a tree trunk opposite Draco, who was still holding the wand on him. "I guess I wanted to tell you," said Sirius, "that you remind me of someone I knew when I went to Hogwarts."

"Really," said Draco, without much interest. "Who? My dad?"

"No," said Sirius. "Me."

Draco laughed shortly. "I don't believe that," he said. "You? You were Harry's dad's best friend, my father told me all about you and James Potter. You were in Gryffindor house, you were do-gooders, you were just...like...*Harry*," he said, with emphasis.

"Maybe James was," said Sirius. "But I was always the bad kid, the do-wrong kid. My parents...well, you don't want to hear about that. Suffice it to say I didn't have the happy home life James did. We were roommates my first year, in Gryffindor, and I hated him."

"You hated him?" Draco was interested now, despite himself.

"Sure, I did. He was an excellent student, nice, great Quidditch player, everyone liked him, and he seemed to be able to be good without trying. Whereas I always went with my first instinct, which was usually bad. And I was always in trouble for fighting. I beat up Severus Snape more times than you can count, sometimes for no reason. Okay, always for no reason, unless you count that he was a slimy little git and I loathed him. Dumbledore despaired of me."

Now Draco looked astonished. "You were in trouble with Dumbledore?"

"All the time," said Sirius.

"Now don't tell me," Draco interjected, "then one day James saved you from a horrible fate, and you realized what a great guy he was after all and you were friends ever after."

"No," said Sirius, "actually, one day I finally pissed him off royally, and he threw a punch at me. I hit him back, of course. Actually, we beat the hell out of each other. Dumbledore forbid Madam Pomfrey to fix our cuts and bruises, so we just had to heal the old-fashioned way, locked up together in the hospital wing. When we came out, we were friends, and stayed friends."

"Are you suggesting I beat the hell out of Harry?" asked Draco, with a shadow of his old grin. "Because that's the kind of advice I could really get into."

"If you want his friendship, it's an unorthodox way to go about it. Is that what you want?"

"No," said Draco. "Oh, hell." He lowered his wand. "I don't know."

Sirius was very still. "I learned a lot of things about myself in Azkaban," he said. "I thought about James a lot, as well. I realized that part of the reason we'd been such great enemies and then such great friends was that we were so alike. Proud. Stubborn. Determined..."

Draco grinned again, a little more strongly this time. "When did Dog Man become Advice Man?" he said.

"Obnoxious," added Sirius. "I forgot obnoxious."

"I do see what you're getting at," Draco admitted. "But I'm not like Harry. I should know. When the Polyjuice spell was working...it was like someone switched a light on inside my head and I could see into every part of my mind, knew why I was doing things, knew what I wanted, knew what the right thing to do was, and wanted to do it. And now..." He snapped his fingers. "It's gone."

"What you're saying," said Sirius gently, "Is that when you had Harry in you, you could be good without trying. Now you'll just have to try. Like the rest of us do."

"Don't preach at me," said Draco. "I hate that." But he didn't look angry. He looked sad, and even more like Narcissa, with the same pale and melancholy beauty. "There's still no point in my going back with you," he said. "They hate me now."

"No, they don't. Harry doesn't hate you, and Hermione definitely doesn't hate you."

Draco looked at Sirius quickly. "Did she say - anything?"

"If you want to know what Hermione's thinking, you'll have to ask her," said Sirius. "Trust me on that one. She's that kind of girl."

"Why are you being so nice to me?" asked Draco, squinting up at Sirius.

"I told you," said Sirius. "You remind me of me. And besides, I think Harry needs you."

"Harry doesn't need someone like me."

"That's where you're wrong," said Sirius. "He needs you a lot more than you think. Now come on." He reached down a hand, and Draco took it. Sirius helped him to his feet. "I should tell you the Weasleys are here," he said.

"Okay, I know *they* hate me," said Draco with finality.

"No, they don't," Sirius began, and stopped. "Okay, they do. But as a wise man once said to me, if you're holding out for universal popularity, you're going to be here a long time."

"Hermione." It was Harry's voice. She opened her eyes and looked up. He was standing over her, a cloudy Harry-shaped shadow backlit by a canopy of stars. For a second she just smiled up at him - it was like a lot of dreams she'd had, and she thought she might not quite be awake. In her dreams, though, Harry hadn't been looking quite so anxious.

"Harry," she said, sitting up. "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah," he said, looking at her with a funny expression. "Will you walk with me?"

"Where?"

"Just a little way," he said. "I don't want to be overheard."

"Okay," she said, getting to her feet and following him. He was walking away from the car, along the side of the chasm.

"I wanted to thank you," he said. "For saving my life."

"I didn't, Harry, you fell," she pointed out, regretfully.

"If you hadn't held on to me as long as you did, Ron and them would have been too late. Did you hear what I said to you?"

"What?" she replied, thrown by his abrupt question. "When?"

He stopped walking and looked at her. His face in the moonlight was dark, lined with silver shadows, the most familiar face in the world to her and yet somehow, the least known. Looking at him had that effect on her, as it always did, of making everything else in the world seem not quite real. "When I was about to fall," he said. "Did you hear me?"

"I thought you said you loved me," she said, looking away. "But maybe you didn't."

There was a long silence. Then he said, "I did."

Her heart started to pound and she looked down at the grass. "I know you love me, Harry," she said. "I'm your best friend. Is that what you mean?"

"You know it isn't," he replied, dropping his voice.

"I told you," she said, "I told you I wasn't going to have this conversation with you again."

"Then don't talk," he said. "Just listen to me."

She raised her head and looked at him again. He had that look on his face. Harry's determined look. The look he got when he had to steel himself up to do some horrible thing, like face a Hungarian Horntail, or defeat the Dark Lord, or tell her how he felt about her. He was biting on his lip. She watched him as if he was someone she had never seen before.

"I love you," he said. "And I don't just love you, I'm *in* love with you. And I have been for ages, I just didn't know it, not really."

Hermione just stood there. She felt as if she'd left her body, and the real Hermione was floating somewhere above her head, watching everything with detached interest.

Harry was looking anxious. "This is supposed to be the bit where you get really happy and kiss me," he said.

"Ages?" Hermione heard herself say. "What do you mean *ages*?"

Harry looked flustered. He obviously hadn't been prepared for questioning. "I-I guess, I mean, I've known it for about two years. Before that it was probably true but I just didn't know it. I remember when I first realized. We were on holiday with your parents and you were wearing that yellow dress - it's not as pretty as the dress you have on now, but -" He gave her a worried smile. "You were so beautiful."

Hermione remembered. She'd worn the yellow dress because it was the first time she would be seeing Harry after two months of vacation, and she'd hoped he would like it, but he hadn't said anything, anything at all.

"Last year," she said slowly, "I told you I loved you. And you said you didn't have any feelings for me besides friendship."

"I didn't want to lose my friendship with you. I guess I was afraid."

"Afraid?" she echoed. "Do you know what that did to me, Harry? Do you know what you put me through? Hearing you say you didn't love me, that was the worst thing that ever happened to me. I can't believe you just -" She was so angry now, her voice was cracking. "You *lied* to me, Harry. And about something like that!"

Harry looked astonished. "I *never* wanted to hurt you," he protested. "I just--I never thought it would work with us, okay? I thought we were too different. And I thought, if I tried to make it work with Cho--"

"That's the difference between you and me," interrupted Hermione, "I never would have tried to make it work with anybody else but you."

"I'm trying with *you* now," said Harry, making a visible effort to be calm.

"You never would have, though, if it hadn't been for Draco. If it hadn't been for him, it never would have occurred to you that you might lose me. You just thought I would sit there, waiting for you to someday show an interest in me, like -- like left luggage!"

"*Luggage*?" Harry was white with shock.

She folded her arms and glared at him. She was filled with unreasonable anger, which she knew was unreasonable, but it didn't help. The look on his face made her even angrier. He had been so sure of her. So certain.

"You don't have to say all this," he said finally. "It'd be enough just to tell me you don't love me back."

"But I do love you, Harry," she said. "I love you more than anything. I love you so it scares me."

"Then *why*?"

But she shook her head. "I don't want to be scared any more," she said, and started moving away from him, back towards the car.

"Hermione!" he called after her, sounding desperate.

She paused without turning around.

"He doesn't love you like I do," he said to her back. "He doesn't *know* you like I do."

"No," she said. "And he can't hurt me like you can."

She walked away.

"I'm never taking your advice again," Harry said to Ron.

He had gone to sit in the car with the Weasleys. Hermione, who was still refusing to talk to him, was standing a distance away, staring off towards the Manor.

Ron's grin began to fade. "What...?"

"She hates me," said Harry, with finality.

Ron, Fred and George all looked utterly and completely astonished. They had obviously been even surer of Hermione's feelings than Harry had been. "Hermione doesn't hate you," said George, at last, in a shocked tone of voice.

"She does," said Harry. "Well, maybe only in that way where she despises me and wants me dead."

"What did you do?" demanded Ron. "You must have done something."

"Thank you, Ron, for the vote of confidence," said Harry in a dead tone of voice.

"I just meant -"

"Have some pumpkin juice," offered Fred, shoving a glass at him.

"I don't want pumpkin juice," said Harry. "I want vodka. Do you have vodka?"

Ron shook his head regretfully. "Just pumpkin juice, really."

"And motor oil," said George. "You want some motor oil?"

"This is it," said Harry in the same dead voice. "I have hit rock bottom."

"Hey, look," said Fred, pointing. "Sirius is coming back. And he's got Malfoy with him."

"I was wrong," said Harry. "Here's an even lower place."

He straightened up reluctantly. Sirius and Draco were indeed coming towards them, Sirius in human form and Draco looking much as he had last time Harry had seen him.

The Weasleys jumped out of the car as Draco and Sirius approached. Harry followed more slowly. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Hermione walking towards them from the edge of the clearing.

Up close, Draco looked -- different. Harry wasn't sure how, exactly. He just did.

Ron, Fred and George all had their arms crossed over their chests. They were looking at Draco as if he were a bomb that was about to go off. "Malfoy," said Ron, nodding guardedly at him.

"Hello, Weasley," said Draco. "Weasleys," he added, glancing at Ron and Fred. Then he turned to Harry and stuck out his hand.

"I wanted to thank you for saving my life," he said.

Harry stared. Draco continued standing there serenely with his hand out. Over Draco's head, Harry could see Sirius glaring at him.

He put his own hand out, took Draco's, and shook it. "You're welcome," he said.

They dropped each other's hands quickly. Then Draco turned to the Weasleys. "Look," he said. "I know you don't like me. A lot of people don't like me."

"I completely believe that," said Ron.

"And I..." Draco frowned. "Dammit, Weasley, you broke my train of thought."

"You were just telling us how nobody likes you," said Fred helpfully.

"I didn't say nobody," snapped Draco, whose air of serenity was beginning to dissipate. He looked up at Sirius.

"Better quit while you're ahead," Sirius advised.

George snapped his fingers, remembering something. "Sirius," he said. "Could you come here and look at the car for a second? It's been making a funny grinding noise...and I thought, since you have that flying motorcycle..."

"Sure," said Sirius.

He followed the Weasleys over to the car. Harry, wanting to be as far away from Hermione as possible, went with them. That left Draco alone with Hermione, who had been very silent throughout the whole exchange.

"Hey," said Draco.

She looked at him and, like Harry, thought he looked...different somehow.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "Sirius told us about the Veritas curse. I was much too ready to think the worst of you and I totally misjudged you and I'm sorry."

Draco shook his head. "You didn't misjudge me," he said. "You thought I was a jerk, and I am a jerk. And I probably always will be."

"Maybe," said Hermione. "But you're a moral jerk. Does that make sense?"

"Not really," said Draco.

"It means," Hermione explained, "that even though I don't trust you to say the right thing - ever - I do trust you to do the right thing. Always."

Draco grinned. "Does this mean that the invitation to spend the holidays chez Granger is still open?"

"Yeah," said Hermione. "And I think my parents might like you, after all, considering you saved my life."

"You know," said Draco, "they say that once you've saved someone's life you're responsible for that person forever. So I'll have to keep an eye on you from now on."

"That seems like an unfair rule," said Hermione.

"Any rule that means I get to spend more time with you is a good rule in my book," said Draco.

Hermione blushed. She couldn't help it. It occurred to her that the only two boys in the world who seemed to be able to make her blush just by looking at her were both standing here on top of this cliff. Of course, one of them wasn't speaking to her.

Draco seemed to be able to read her mind. "You're thinking about Harry," he said.

"We had a talk," she replied. "It didn't go well."

"He looks awful," said Draco.

"So would you, if you fell off a cliff," said Hermione defensively.

Draco grinned at her. "That's not what I meant, and you know it," he said. "You just have no idea what you want, do you?"

"I always thought I wanted Harry," she said. "Now I don't know anymore." She sighed. "He just makes me so *mad*."

"Off the topic of Harry," said Draco, "although I love talking about him, of course, something just occurred to me."

"What?"

"I've never kissed you while I was in *my* body," said Draco.

Hermione felt herself blushing again. "Would it be...different?"

"One way to find out," he said, giving her a lazy, catlike sort of smile.

"*Hermione!*"

It was Sirius calling. She turned and saw his gesturing her and Draco back towards the car. He and Harry and the Weasleys were already sitting in it, ready to go.

She looked back at Draco, who seemed unperturbed. "It's all right," he said. "We'll have plenty of time during the holidays."

Awfully confident, isn't he? Hermione thought as they headed back towards the car. Just the opposite of Harry. Harry, who was sitting in the back seat, next to Ron, and staring fixedly off towards the Pit.

Draco got in and sat next to Harry, who didn't turn around. This left nowhere for Hermione to sit.

"Out of room?" said George cheerfully. "Hermione, you'll just have to sit on someone's lap."

Both Draco and Harry looked at her. Harry looked hurriedly away. Hermione glared at George, then sat in Ron's lap.

"Couldn't you have made this space bigger with magic?" she asked George as they backed up.

"And your point is?" he said airily, and revved the car. It shot forward and upward with a loud bang, George shouted in glee, Ron complained loudly in Hermione's ear that she was squashing his leg, and over all the noise, she heard Harry make a noise that sounded very much like a yell of pain.

She spun around and saw Harry rising out of his seat. In fact, he wasn't rising so much as it looked like he was being lifted by invisible hands -- hauled up by the collar of his shirt and dragged backwards, out of his seat. He had his hands at his throat, trying to keep his shirt from cutting off his air supply.

"George!" screamed Hermione. "Stop the car!"

They were about ten feet off the ground now. George turned around, saw Harry, goggled, and slammed the brakes on. The effect of this was that Harry sailed up into the air, hurtled over the back of the car and fell twenty feet to the ground.

George slammed the gas on again, whipped the car around in a circle, and propelled it back toward the ground. They landed with a bone-jarring thud and began piling out of the doors.

The first thing Hermione saw as she scrambled out of the car was Harry, kneeling on the ground. He had his hands behind his back.

The second thing she saw was Lucius Malfoy, standing about five feet away from Harry. He was holding his wand in one outstretched hand and had it pointed directly at Harry's heart.

"All of you," he said, not looking at them. "Stay where you are."

"How did he find us?" Hemrione hissed at Sirius.

"Epicyclical Charm," Sirius whispered back. He was looking anxiously at Lucius. "Acts as a homing device."

Lucius stepped a little closer to Harry, keeping his wand trained on him. "Harry Potter," he said. Lucius was looking much the worse for wear. His hair was standing wildly out all over his head and his robes, where they weren't slashed and torn, were smeared with blood and mud. "You have caused me a great deal of trouble." He lifted

his head, looked at the others where they stood by the car, open-mouthed with shock. His eyes lingered on Draco. "All of you have caused me a great deal of trouble."

"Leave him alone, Lucius," growled Sirius.

"Why should I?" said Lucius, now looking back at Harry. It looked, Hermione thought, like he had put some sort of Binding Hex on Harry's hands, she could see ropes around his wrists.

"Because you can't kill all of us," said Sirius sharply. "And if you touch Harry -"

"Why says I can't kill you all?" said Lucius, looking quite insane. "I am a Malfoy! In my veins runs the blood of Salazar Slytherin!"

"It does not," said Harry, suddenly. "Dumbledore told me there were no descendants of Slytherin left alive besides Voldemort!"

Lucius snapped his head back and glared at Harry. "It is beyond my comprehension how all of our efforts to kill one stupid little boy have come to nothing," he said. "But no more. My master wished to have the pleasure of killing you, but he will have to content himself with the pleasure of being presented with your dead body."

He pointed his wand at Harry. "*Avada--*"

And broke off. Because Draco had darted forward and placed himself between Lucius' wand...and Harry. He faced his father, panting slightly, looking at him steadily.

Lucius Malfoy frowned. "Get out of the way, Draco," he said impatiently.

"No," said Draco, who was looking very pale. "If you want to kill Harry, you'll have to kill me first."

Lucius looked furious. "Don't be a fool," he said.

Behind Draco, Harry began to struggle to his feet. He was doing something with his hands, but Hermione couldn't see what.

"I know you would have let the Dark Lord kill me," said Draco, still looking at his father. "But I don't know if you can do it yourself."

"I assure you I can," said Lucius. "And I will. Move out of the way."

"Kill him and you lose Narcissa, too," said Sirius.

"Shut up, Black," snapped Lucius. His hand went to his throat and closed over the pendant there. He lifted it over his head. Draco looked at him, confused.

"You are my son and my only heir," said Lucius to Draco. "For the last time, will you move out of the way?"

Draco shook his head. "No."

"Ah, well," said Lucius. "I am young. I can marry again. I will have more children."

And he tightened his hand on the pendant in his fist, digging his nails in.

Draco screamed and crashed to the earth like a tree falling. As he fell, he collided with Harry, who was knocked to the ground with Draco on top of him - blue in the face, but still breathing.

Lucius released his tight hold on the pendant, and Hermione saw it glimmering in his fist - dented, but not broken.

Not yet.

Lucius began striding across the grass towards Harry and Draco. Hermione glanced sideways and saw that Ron, Fred and George all had gone for their wands, and were about to point them at Lucius.

"Not now!" she whispered at them.

They looked at her as if she were crazy.

"Wait," she hissed.

Lucius reached the crumpled forms of Harry and Draco. He bent down and seized the back of his son's shirt in one hand, and yanked him off Harry. He shoved Draco's limp body aside.

Harry lay on the ground with his hands under him, looking up at Lucius.

"Goodbye, Harry," said Lucius, lifting his wand.

Harry sat up -- and Hermione saw something silver flash sudden and bright in his right hand. It was the sword he had taken from the fencing-room back at the Manor. He slashed out with it, and cut Lucius' wand in half. Harry jumped to his feet as Lucius yelled and fell back, the fingers of his right hand pouring blood, his other hand still gripping the Epicyclical charm.

Harry turned his head towards Hermione and she knew immediately what he wanted her to do. "Hermione!" he shouted. "*Now!*"

Hermione pointed her wand. "*Accio!*" she cried, and the Epicyclical pendant shot out of Lucius' left hand and flew through the air towards her. She caught it very carefully and turned to the Weasleys, who had their wands trained on Lucius.

"Go," she said.

"Stupefy!" shouted Ron, Fred and George.

White light shot from their wands and struck Lucius head-on. Hermione had seen what the combined force of several Stunning spells could do before, but it was no less impressive this time. Lucius was blasted sideways and flew through the air, fetching up against the trunk of a tree, where he lay very still.

Harry dropped to his knees next to Draco, still holding the sword. Hermione and Sirius ran to join him, while the Weasleys hurried to see if Lucius was still conscious, and therefore dangerous.

Kneeling, Hermione put her hand on Draco's shoulder. He was still looking bluish, but his breathing seemed to be regular. She looked up at Sirius worriedly.

"Is he going to be all right?" she asked.

"I think he fainted from the pain," said Sirius quietly.

Draco stirred, and his eyes opened. "I did not," he said. "I don't faint."

"That's right," said Harry. "You just decided to take a rest in the middle of all the excitement."

Draco looked at Hermione. "My father?"

"He's alive," she said quickly. "We Stunned him."

Draco suddenly looked very, very tired. "That's good."

There were black shadows under his eyes. Hermione reached out and, very gently, touched his face. "You were amazing," she said. "You really were."

Draco looked at Harry. "How did you get those ropes off?" he said.

Harry lifted the sword. "Sliced them off on the edge of this," he said, and Hermione saw that his wrists were cut and bleeding a little. "And you know what else?" he added, and turned the sword over. "I think your dad might have been right about you all being related to Slytherin." He turned the blade so the others could see the words inscribed on the handle, just above the green gems: *Salazar Slytherin*.

"I always knew I was special," said Draco, and shut his eyes again.

Harry looked at Hermione. He didn't look angry any more. Just tired, and worried, and sad.

"Good Summoning Charm, Hermione," he said. "Thanks."

She nodded at him, not trusting herself to speak.

At that moment, Ron, Fred and George came up. Ron was walking ahead, Fred and George were dragging Lucius between them. Sirius glanced up at them.

"Put him in the back of the car," he said.

Although Sirius had doubtless meant them to put Lucius in the back seat, the Weasleys commenced stuffing him into the boot instead. Sirius looked at them, shrugged, and turned back to Draco.

"And when we get back to school," said Draco, turning to look at Sirius, "you're going to tell me what was up with that pendant thing?"

"Sure," said Sirius, looking anxious.

"And Potter, you're going to give me that sword back? Cause it isn't yours, you know. It's been in my family for years."

"Malfoy," said Harry, without rancor, "you never even noticed it until today, did you?"

"Maybe, maybe not," said Draco. He grinned up at Harry, whose face, to Hermione's surprise, broke into a very tired, very reluctant smile.

"Whatever you say, Malfoy," he said. "Whatever you say."

Chapter Eleven- Of Magids and Mirrors

"Whatever you say, Malfoy," said Harry, and, with surprising gentleness, laid Salazar Slytherin's sword in the crook of Draco's arm.

Draco closed his hand around it. "Thanks, Potter," he said, with visible effort.

Sirius, Harry and Hermione exchanged worried looks. Leaving Harry and Hermione sitting on either side of Draco, Sirius got up and walked over to the flying car. The Weasley brothers had just finished stuffing the unconscious Lucius Malfoy headfirst into the boot, and were looking at each other in a satisfied manner.

"Hallo, Sirius," said Ron as he approached. "We put Lucius in the back, like you said."

"Thanks," said Sirius. "But he isn't the Malfoy I'm concerned about at the moment."

Fred shook his head. "I never thought I'd feel sorry for Draco Malfoy," he said. "But I kind of do now. Mind, I still don't like him. But his own father trying to kill him like that..." Fred shuddered. "Makes me feel lucky by comparison."

"You are lucky," said Sirius shortly.

Ron was biting his lower lip. "Was Lucius really trying to kill him?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," said Sirius. "Nearly succeeded, too. And might still, if we don't get Draco back to Hogwarts soon. He's dying."

George dropped the car keys. "*Dying?*" he echoed, staring at Sirius in shock.

"Get the car ready," said Sirius shortly, and walked back to Draco. He knelt down next to him and said, "Can you walk?"

Draco seemed to be giving this consideration. Then he said, with a faint look of surprise, "Actually. No."

Hermione looked as if she were going to burst into tears, but didn't.

"Never mind," said Sirius roughly, bent down, and picked Draco up as if he weighed no more than a child might, not a nearly full-grown adult. As he lifted him, the sword fell out of Draco's grasp and thudded to the ground.

Harry picked it up and held it out to Sirius, who reached out his free hand and took it by the hilt.

And dropped it again, immediately, as if he had been burned.

When he spoke again, it was in an oddly constrained voice. "Harry. You take the sword."

"Okay," said Harry, looking surprised.

"And don't let anyone else touch it," said Sirius, and started walking with Draco back to the car.

"What was that about?" asked Hermione wonderingly.

But Harry wasn't paying attention. Looking after Sirius and Draco, he said, in a tight voice, "I had forgotten how strong Sirius is."

She turned and looked at Harry, and he looked back. It was the first time he had looked her in the eye since their conversation on top of the cliff earlier. She couldn't help feeling like there was something different about the way he was looking at her. Something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"Do you think he's going to die?" she asked.

Harry shook his head. "I hope not," he said, and stood up, picking up the sword as he did so. "But Sirius seems to think he's pretty weak. I really don't know."

As she followed Harry back to the car, Hermione glanced down at the Epicyclical Charm in her hand. It was a nastily beautiful thing - white gold outlining a pendant of glass, inside which was a single one of Draco's baby teeth. She could see where Lucius' nails had dented the soft, pure gold, where his hand had bent the glass until it curved like the lens of a telescope.

Sirius had put Draco in the back of the car, where he slumped against the window, his arms around himself as if he were cold. He gave Hermione a faint smile as she climbed in next to him, then shut his eyes. Sirius got in next to her.

Harry was sitting up front, with the Weasleys.

Hermione watched Draco breathing as George backed the car up, then drove it up into the air and swooped out over the cliff. Over her shoulder, she had a feeling Sirius was watching him breathe as well. Not that she had the faintest idea what she would do if he suddenly stopped.

She glanced down as they sailed out over the Pit, inky black and infinite under the lightening night sky. She was still holding the charm in her fist, and something occurred to her. Wherever the Charm was it would always be a danger to Draco, vulnerable as it was to damage and breakage. But if she flung it into the Pit - it would fall, and fall forever, untouched by any force other than wind. She had been wondering what could possibly be done with it, now...

She turned toward the back of the car, gripping the charm, wondering if she should throw it. Then she felt a light touch on her wrist.

She glanced down and saw, to her surprise, that it was Draco. He was very pale, the skin under his eyes almost translucent, but he was awake. He whispered, "Don't."

She stared at him. Did he know what it was?

"I think I do know what it is," he said. "I've always sort of known. But I want you to keep it."

"Keep it?" Hermione was horrified. "I don't want -"

"Please," he said, and shut his eyes.

Slowly, Hermione drew her hand back. With a feeling of grave reluctance, she undid the chain, placed it around her neck, and fastened the clasp. She felt the cold of it against her skin as the pendant dropped down inside her shirt. It was heavy. Much heavier than she would have thought. Like an anchor around her neck.

* * * *

The sky had lightened to slate blue by the time they landed on the Hogwarts grounds, and Draco was now quite unconscious and could not be shaken awake. As soon as they touched down, Sirius jumped out of the car. "I'm going for Dumbledore," he said, dropped to all fours in his canine form, and bolted for the castle.

Nobody could think of anything to say. The Weasleys went to make sure that Lucius was still unconscious in the trunk. Hermione and Harry sat, watching Draco breathe. Hermione wanted to ask him whether he was still angry with her, but it seemed somehow rude to have such a conversation with Draco there, even if he was unconscious. At last, she said,

"Harry, are you all right?"

He glanced up at her. "I'm fine," he said. His voice was devoid of expression, and he still had that odd look on his face that she couldn't quite identify.

"Your wrists are still bleeding," she said in a small voice. "Do you want-"

He got out of the car without looking at her, and went over to the Weasleys. Hermione sat where she was, trying not to cry.

And then Sirius was back, with Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey, and everything was a blur. Madam Pomfrey ordered them all away from Draco, magicked up a stretcher, lifted him onto it, and they hurried away with it without a backward glance. They all watched her go with various degrees of misgiving.

"Professor," said Hermione in a small voice, "Did she say whether he was going to be all right?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "As to that," he said heavily, "I cannot, at the moment, say." He turned to the Weasleys. "I know you must be tired, boys," he said, and added, with a slight twinkle, "And I know your father must want his car back. But I would like to ask you if you would do one more favor for us."

They nodded agreement.

"We need you to take Lucius to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and turn him over to the Aurors there," said Dumbledore. "I have spoken to them. They will be expecting you." He turned to Sirius. "Sirius, give them the details. I

need to go to the hospital wing and see if I can be of assistance to Madam Pomfrey. Harry and Hermione...come with me, please."

"There is one thing, Professor," said Sirius quickly. "The sword I told you about - Harry has it."

Dumbledore looked at Harry. "May I see it?"

Harry handed it to him, and Dumbledore looked at it consideringly. "I see," he said, after a long pause, and then handed it back to Harry. "Don't let anyone else touch this," he said, just as Sirius had. He turned and headed back towards the castle, and Harry and Hermione hurried after him.

* * *

"How is he?" asked Dumbledore, staring down at the pale boy in the bed. Harry and Hermione, on either side of him, looked on with unhappy expressions.

"He'll live," said Madam Pomfrey, who looked tired but much less worried. "I gave him several Strengthening Draughts and an Energy Potion. There's no lasting damage, and he may well wake up soon. The boy is actually quite strong, although he doesn't look it."

"I want to be notified the moment he is awake," said Dumbledore.

The door to the ward opened, and Sirius came in. "They've gone," he said to Dumbledore.

Madam Pomfrey was looking irritable. "This is a hospital wing, not a train station," she snapped. "This boy needs to rest."

Hermione wanted to smile at Harry. She was so used to hearing Madam Pomfrey speak those words when Harry was under her care, as he often was after some strange adventure he'd gotten himself mixed up in. But Harry wouldn't look at her.

"You're right, Poppy," said Dumbledore equably. "Harry, come back to my office with me, I'd like to talk to you. Sirius and Miss Granger, you may remain here with Draco if you like."

Dumbledore left with Harry, and Sirius and Hermione took seats on either side of Draco's bed. It was true that he did look better. Some color had come back into his face.

Hermione was glad to be alone with Sirius. She had wanted to ask him something. Reaching into her blouse, she pulled out the Epicyclical Charm and showed it to him. "Draco wanted me to keep this, but I don't know what I should do with it," she said. "I was going to toss it into the Bottomless Pit, but.."

"Good thing you didn't," said Sirius. "If Lucius ever goes to trial, we'll need that as evidence. It's ten years in Azkaban for making one of those things, and probably a further ten years for trying to kill someone with it. And when that person is your own son...."

"Good," said Hermione, with finality. "Sirius..."

"Yes?"

"Why won't you let anyone but Harry touch that sword?" she asked.

In answer, Sirius held up his hand and she saw what looked like an angry red burn across his palm. "That's why," he said. "If I'd held it any longer it would have charred away my hand."

"But Draco touched it, and he's all right," she said.

"Yes he is," said Sirius, turning to look at Draco again. "Which opens up all sorts of interesting possibilities."

"You're not going to tell me, are you?" she said crankily. "You're just going to be cryptic."

"Actually, there was something I wanted to tell you," said Sirius.

She raised her eyebrows inquiringly.

"Don't be too hard on Harry," he said calmly. "The people he's really loved in his life, well, they tend to die. Makes him jumpy about expressing emotion."

"Maybe we could do a little less of the advice-giving," said Draco, "and a little more of the taking care of the patient? I am the focus of attention here, am I not?"

They both jumped and stared at him. He was awake and looking at them, not smiling, but with amusement in his clear gray eyes.

"Draco!" cried Hermione happily, and threw her arms around him.

"Ow," he said, but he was smiling now.

"Sorry," she said, pulling back. "Did I hurt you?"

"Getting stomped on by ten Death Eaters hurt me," said Draco. "You just...reminded me."

Sirius was looking at him hard. "How long have you been awake?" he said. "Did you hear us talking about the Epicyclical Charm?"

"Yeah," said Draco, not smiling any more.

Sirius opened his mouth, but Draco shook his head. "It's all right," he said. "I get it. I get as much as I want to. Don't explain."

Sirius shut his mouth and stood up, still looking worried. "I'm going for Dumbledore," he said. "I'll be right back."

* * *

"Harry," said Dumbledore, after a long pause.

"Yes, Professor?"

Harry had just finished telling Dumbledore his version of the past week's events. They were sitting in the Headmaster's office, a beautiful circular room of which Harry was very fond. This was lucky, since he seemed to end up there quite a lot.

Dumbledore was obviously thinking much the same thing. "I had been hoping this would be the term that did not end with you sitting in my office looking as if you had just survived a goblin rebellion. Alas, this appears to have been too much to hope for," he lamented. "In addition, we have Aurors scrambling all over England at the moment, trying to put Memory Charms on all the Muggles who have reported seeing wizards drop out of the sky, thanks to your friend Miss Granger's extremely effective Whirlwind Charm. As for Lord Voldemort-" Dumbledore sighed. "We have no idea where he may be."

"I'm really sorry about all this, Professor," said Harry listlessly.

Dumbledore's eyebrows lifted. "Come, Harry," he said. "You must know that I don't blame you. Any more than I blamed you for having your name put in the Goblet of Fire."

"Yeah," said Harry in the same listless voice. "Everything happens to me, doesn't it?"

"You are special," said Dumbledore. "Even you do not know how special."

"So tell me," said Harry.

"I plan to," said Dumbledore unexpectedly. "But I am waiting for young Malfoy to wake up first, as it concerns him as well," he added, even more unexpectedly.

Harry stared. "What's it got to do with Malfoy?"

Now Dumbledore was looking at him consideringly. "You don't like him, do you?"

"Not much," said Harry, staring at the floor.

"And yet you offered your own life for his, by your account and Sirius'," said Dumbledore. "And he for you. Why is that?"

"I-don't know," said Harry, looking startled. "Professor -"

"Yes?"

"Lucius Malfoy said his family were descended from Slytherin. And this sword, here, was his. But you told me there were no descendents of Slytherin left besides Voldemort."

"I was wrong," said Dumbledore cheerfully. "It happens. Salazar Slytherin lived many hundreds of years ago. Certainly there are some descendants of his still living. None with a really significant concentration of Slytherin blood, though. Or so I thought. It's rather like you, having Gryffindor blood-"

Harry upset the ink-bottle he had been toying with. "I've got Gryffindor blood?"

"Oh, dear," said Dumbledore cheerfully. "That was meant to be a secret."

"Well, no wonder Malfoy and I don't like each other, then," said Harry. "Gryffindor and Slytherin, they didn't like each other, either."

"You and Malfoy put me in mind of two other boys I knew once," said Dumbledore. "I had them in my office more times than I could count. How they detested each other! And yet. By the end of their acquaintance, they would have died for each other. That I know."

Harry looked at Dumbledore curiously.

"James Potter and Sirius Black," said Dumbledore.

Astonished, Harry was about to protest, when the door opened and Sirius stuck his head in. "Professor," he said. "Draco Malfoy's awake. I think you should see him."

* * *

"It's too bad Dad couldn't be here," said George Weasley, using his wand to direct an unconscious Lucius Malfoy's progress up the stairs of the Magical Law Enforcement building. (Ron had been left at the curb with the unenviable task of preventing passers-by from bumping into the invisible car.) "He's always wanted to see the Malfoys get it in the neck."

"Quit bashing Lucius into the pillars, George," said Fred.

"Sorry," said George unrepentantly. "My wand hand's a little shaky."

A small crowd of Law Enforcement Wizards was waiting for them inside the building. Among them was Mad-Eye Moody, standing next to a tall witch whose hood was pulled down. He winked at them with his magical eye as they came in.

George took his wand off Lucius, who fell to the ground in the center of the circle of wizards and lay there, snoring slightly. "Here you go," he said cheerfully. "Lucius Malfoy. He's all yours, gentlemen."

The wizards goggled at him.

Mad-Eye Moody took the lead, "Dumbledore said you caught Malfoy with an illegal Epicyclical Charm," he growled. "Is that true?"

Fred and George began talking at once.

"He kidnapped Sirius Black--"

"Used the Cruciatus Curse on Hermione Granger -- she's a Hogwarts student--"

"Loads of Black Arts stuff in his house --"

"Tried to kill his own son with that Epicyclical thing-- we saw him--"

"He's a criminal!" said George in conclusion. "And a complete wanker, as well. Toss him in the clink." He looked beatific for a moment. "I've always wanted to say that."

"Witnesses?" asked one of the wizards, sounding irritable.

"What?" said Fred, caught off guard.

"Witnesses," rumbled Mad-Eye Moody. "It's not that we don't know Lucius Malfoy is a bad lot. We've known that for years. But there's never been anyone who'd testify against him."

Fred and George looked at each other. "Well," said George uncertainly. "Us. We're witnesses."

The wizards looked dubious.

"And Sirius Black," added George.

The wizards still looked dubious. Although Sirius had been cleared the year before of the murder charge against him (aided by Dumbledore and the fact that it had become evident that Peter Pettigrew was still alive and a cohort of Voldemort's) he was still far from being considered an upstanding member of the magical community.

"And Harry Potter," said Fred desperately.

There was some muttering at this. Most of the magical world considered Harry a hero, but there were plenty who distrusted his still-mysterious history and powers. George caught the words "Parselmouth" and "Always full of some mad story, isn't he?"

Fred and George looked at each other with dawning anxiety.

"I'll testify," said a voice.

Everyone turned to see who had spoken. It was the slender witch standing next to Mad-Eye Moody, who until now had been silent. The witch raised her hands and pushed her hood back.

It was Narcissa.

Mad-Eye was grinning. He had obviously been expecting this. Fred and George, however, were floored.

"I'll testify," she said again. "I am Narcissa Malfoy. Lucius Malfoy was my husband. I can confirm that he is indeed guilty of all the charges laid at his door. In addition, I will open Malfoy Manor to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and allow your Aurors free rein over all its passages. There should be enough Dark Magic material there to keep them busy for a year. I will also," she went on, now speaking directly to Mad-Eye Moody, who was looking as if Christmas had come early, "give you all of Lucius' papers. There is much in there regarding Lord Voldemort and what he and my husband termed The Plan. It should make for interesting reading."

"But--but why?" stuttered one of the wizards.

"Because I want something from you in return," Narcissa replied.

"Indeed?" said Mad-Eye Moody, looking as if he already knew. "And what is that?"

"I don't want Lucius sent to Azkaban," said Narcissa.

George and Fred were horrified.

"Why not?" cried Fred.

"You can't mean they should let him go?" protested George.

Narcissa looked at the prone figure of her husband for a long moment. "I do not ask for myself," she said. "I would be happy to see him in Azkaban for life. But we have a child. Draco. My son." She looked up at Moody. "I don't want him thinking about his father in Azkaban. Thinking of him suffering, going mad." She turned to the rest of the wizards. "I ask that you send him to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies instead. To the section for the criminally insane."

"I think we can agree on that," said Mad-Eye quickly.

There was a long silence. Then the other wizards nodded agreement.

"Is it really horrible there?" asked George hopefully.

Mad-Eye grinned at him, but the other wizards were busy talking amongst themselves and ignored the Weasleys. One of the wizards magicked up a stretcher and levitated Lucius onto it. Several of the other wizards broke off from the group to escort Lucius away, presumably to a holding cell of some sort.

The rest of the wizards seemed interested only in talking to Narcissa, but she stepped away from them and walked over to Fred and George.

"I wanted to thank you," she said. "Dumbledore sent Mad-Eye to me and he told me what happened. I wanted to thank you for everything you did for Draco."

George blushed. Narcissa might be a good deal older than he was, and Draco Malfoy's mother to boot, but she was still very beautiful. "It was nothing," he said.

"Would you do me a favor?" she went on, and held out an envelope to them. "I wrote Draco a letter, since I can't be with him right now. Will you give it to him?"

"Sure. Of course," said George, taking the letter.

"Thank you," she said again, bent down, kissed each of them on the cheek, and walked back to the wizards, who escorted her out of the room. Fred and George, now both beet red under their red hair, headed back to the car.

* * *

When Harry, Dumbledore and Sirius walked into the room, Hermione and Draco were talking. She was leaning forward with her elbows on his pillow, and he had

his head turned towards her. They were chatting animatedly, and only broke off when Dumbledore cleared his throat.

"Feeling better, Mr Malfoy?" he said, twinkling. He took a seat next to Draco, and Harry and Sirius sat down opposite him. Harry was holding Salazar Slytherin's sword across his lap. It looked incongruous in the hospital room.

"Harry," said Dumbledore. "And Draco." Dumbledore looked from one to the other over the rim of his gold spectacles. "Do either of you," he said, "know what a Magid is?"

Harry and Draco looked at him blankly.

Dumbledore turned to Hermione, who had the expression she usually got in class when she knew the answer to a question and nobody else did. "Miss Granger?"

"Well, Professor Binns told me that a Magid is a rare kind of wizard, born with special talents," said Hermione promptly. "Salazar Slytherin was one. So was Rowena Ravenclaw. You are, Professor. And-" She hesitated. "The Dark Lord is one."

"A Magid is indeed a rare kind of wizard or witch," Dumbledore agreed. "Rare and very powerful. A Magid can perform magic without the use of a wand, can resist many curses and hexes, and can survive spells that would easily kill any other wizard." He turned to Harry. "Do you remember, Harry, when you asked me why Voldemort wanted to kill you when you were a baby?"

Harry nodded, looking unhappy. "You said I couldn't know then, but you would tell me eventually."

"I'm telling you now," said Dumbledore. "You are a Magid, Harry."

Both Draco and Hermione whipped around to look at Harry, who was pale with surprise. Sirius didn't look surprised at all - it was obvious he had already known.

"I am?" Harry said, sounding shocked.

"Yes, you are," said Dumbledore. "You are a very powerful Magid indeed."

"Oh, *typical*," said Draco, sounding irritated. "Now Potter's a Magid, on top of everything else?"

Dumbledore turned to Draco, who blanched for a moment, thinking the Headmaster was about to tell him off. Instead, Dumbledore said, "You are a Magid as well, Mr Malfoy. And, if I am not mistaken, a far more powerful one than Harry."

Draco turned even paler than Harry had. "Are you sure?" he asked, sounding very dubious indeed.

"I wasn't," said Dumbledore. "I have always known it about you," he said, turning back to Harry. "We knew it when you were born. It was why Voldemort wanted to kill you, why your parents had to go into hiding with you. He did not want a Magid child born to two of his greatest enemies, two of my greatest supporters."

He knew that when you become old enough, you would become a weapon with which we could strike at him."

"What about me?" interrupted Draco. "Why didn't he try to kill me?"

"Why should he?" said Dumbledore reasonably. "You are the child of his closest supporter. Think what a weapon you could have been in his arsenal! You could have been the greatest Death Eater of them all." Dumbledore shook his head. "Your father kept it very quiet, Draco. Parents with Magid children are supposed to register them with the Ministry at birth; he never registered you. I doubt anyone knew about you besides Lucius and Voldemort himself. Various tools of divination that I myself employ indicated to me that there was another Magid at Hogwarts, but I never knew who it was."

Draco was quiet, remembering something his father had said to him that morning; *The Dark Lord had such high hopes for you, Draco.*

"How do you know?" he asked Dumbledore. "How do you know I am one?"

"That sword, for instance," said Dumbledore, pointing at it where it lay across Draco's lap. "That is a very powerful magical object, Draco. Only a Magid could touch that sword. Then there is the fact that Lucius made an Epicyclical Charm from your teeth when you were a baby. He used it to control you and your mother, that's true, but it also allowed him to draw on some of your Magid powers. It made him a much stronger wizard than he would have been otherwise."

Draco and Harry were both goggling at the Headmaster. Hermione said, "Professor Dumbledore?"

"Yes?"

"Is the reason the Polyjuice Potion affected Harry and Draco in the way it did...is that because they're Magids?"

"A good guess, Miss Granger. In some ways, an accurate guess. The Polyjuice spell lasted the way it did, in fact, because Mr Malfoy caused it to."

"Lucius did what?" said Harry blankly.

"He means me, idiot," said Draco. "And I did nothing of the sort!" he added, glaring at Dumbledore.

"Oh, yes you did," said Dumbledore, twinkling. "If I might be so bold as to make the statement that you and Harry have always had, shall we say, a rivalry of sorts..."

"He's jealous of me, if that's what you mean," interrupted Draco.

Harry rolled his eyes.

"Indeed," said Dumbledore. "Well, I posit this theory. When you took the Polyjuice Potion, Mr Malfoy, and it turned you into Harry, you immediately saw the advantage in the situation to yourself. To be Harry. To live his life. See as he

saw. Learn his secrets. You father has taught you to find weakness and exploit it as a matter of course, has he not?"

Draco looked ashen. "I..."

"Professor," protested Sirius.

Dumbledore ignored them both. "He has taught you other such things," he went on in the same measured tone. "To see evil when good is offered, to slight those beneath you and fawn on those above you. To favor nothing over immediate personal gain."

"I never..." said Draco weakly. "Not on purpose..."

"I said he taught you," said Dumbledore. "I did not say you learned. I think there were other advantages to you in becoming Harry. You have always thought of Harry as someone to whom goodness comes easily. In Harry's skin, you could allow yourself to follow the natural, better inclinations which as yourself, you stifled. You could be good. Brave. Heroic." He looked at Draco, very hard, over the top of his spectacles. "I am not saying that you consciously affected the Polyjuice spell," he went on. "I am saying that you willed it to continue, no ordinary wizard could have done that. You made the charm last as long as it did. You used your own energy, Magid energy, to keep the spell from expiring. And, as I understand, it took another Magid to take the spell off you."

Draco was staring at the Headmaster, mouth open.

"I have one more question, Professor," said Hermione in a small voice.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"If Draco and Harry are Magids...why hasn't Harry shown any sign of it? And why didn't Draco show any sign of it until now?"

"It is a trait that does not usually show itself until late adolescence. It can be random, or it can take various stimuli to activate it."

"Like what?" asked Harry, curiously.

Harry wasn't completely sure but it seemed to him that Dumbledore looked faintly embarrassed. "Strong emotion of a particular sort," Dumbledore said. "Danger works, too. In fact, in the old days, if a Magid child hadn't shown any sign of ability by the time they were eighteen or so, the Ministry would usually send them up against a dragon or some other such monster."

Harry looked anxious. "I've already faced a dragon, and I haven't shown any signs of being a Magid, Professor..."

"That's all right, Harry," said Dumbledore cheerfully. "We'll give you another two years, then we'll feed you to a basilisk."

Harry squinted at him. He was fairly sure Dumbledore was joking. Wasn't he?

"I'll talk to the two of you at length about this later," said Dumbledore. "I fear that if we overstay our welcome any longer, Madam Pomfrey will have strong words for me."

Hermione smiled at Draco as she got up. "I'll come back tomorrow," she said.

Harry laid the sword down on Draco's bed, where he could put his hand on it if he wanted to. "Later, Malfoy," he said.

"Is there any chance, Professor," asked Harry, as they left the room, "that my Magid blood comes from Godric Gryffindor?"

"Old Godric the Grouchy, as my partner Nicholas Flamel used to call him?" said Dumbledore, looking cheerful. "Oh, I doubt it, Harry. He wasn't a Magid. Not at all. Great warrior, of course. Very brave. Always shouting. That was how he terrified the enemy, you know, with his dreadful battle cries."

"I thought it was his courage and tactical brilliance," said Harry.

"Oh, no," said Dumbledore. "All down to shouting, really."

* * *

Sirius and Dumbledore headed back to his office to talk, and Hermione and Harry, both of whom were exhausted, walked slowly back to Gryffindor Tower. They paused at the portrait hole, and Hermione turned to Harry.

"Are you pleased?" she said, in a small voice. "About being a Magid?"

"Sure," said Harry. He looked peaked and drawn with exhaustion, there were black smudges of tiredness under his green eyes. "You bet I am."

She stared at him, and understood suddenly what it was that seemed different about his expression. It was flat, unreadable - and she had never been unable to read Harry's expressions before. She had thought she knew every tone and shade of emotion in his voice, on his face, but now...whatever it was he was feeling, he was hiding it from her.

"Harry, about before -"

"No," he said fiercely.

She stopped. "No what?"

"No, I don't want to talk to you right now," he said in a flat voice.

"But--"

"Let me guess," he said, turning to face her and looking as angry as she had ever seen him, "you thought of some *other* way to tell me how I'm a huge disappointment to you and you want nothing to do with me, and it can't possibly wait because you don't want to risk the chance of me spending even one more night thinking you might possibly, someday, change your mind. Right?"

Hermione was shocked at his bitter tone. "Harry, I'm sorry--"

"I don't want to talk to you about this," he said. "I don't know why you're bringing it up again. Maybe you want to tell me again how much I've hurt you, how my behavior has ruined any chance I might have had with you. And then you'll go off and flirt with Malfoy, just like you did before. Because apparently everything *he's* done hasn't ruined *his* chances with you."

She opened her mouth to protest, then closed it. He was right. She had flirted with Draco in front of him. And maybe she had done it to hurt him. If she had, it had obviously worked. Which was small consolation.

Harry turned around. "Boomslang," he said to the portrait, and it swung open.

"Harry, I'm sorry," she said again, desperately. "Whatever you want me to say -"

"Right now there's only one thing I want," he said. "I want to be away from *you*."

He stepped through the portrait hole. After a moment, Hermione followed him.

Ron, Fred and George were grouped around the fire, and greeted their entry with happy cries. Harry walked over to them and flung himself down in a chair. Hermione, feeling herself on the verge of tears, turned the other way and ran up the steps to the girls' dorm.

Halfway up the stairs, she heard someone calling her, and turned around.

It was Ron. "Hermione, wait," he said.

She came down a few steps until she was standing just above him and he had to tilt his head back to look at her (a rare experience for Ron, who was one of the tallest boys in school.) "What is it?" she asked.

"Are you in love with Malfoy?" he said sharply.

"What?"

"You heard me," he said, sounding very stern. "Because Harry thinks you are. I told him you weren't, but he doesn't believe it."

"If Harry wants to know, why doesn't he ask me?" she said angrily.

"Oh, I dunno," said Ron, irritably, "maybe because last time he asked you anything you nearly took his head off."

"Oh, so everyone knows about that, now?"

"Hermione," said Ron, sounding a bit desperate now, "you can't honestly be thinking of taking up with Draco Malfoy can you? I mean, it's completely mad. He'll never make you happy, he'll just lead you a dance while he goes larking off with other girls behind your back, and he'll probably join a rock band and dye his hair blue and you'll have to wait at home with the kids while he swans around and eventually he'll leave you with nothing but memories and weedy little blond children."

"Ron," said Hermione respectfully, "sod off, will you? You have no idea what you're talking about, you sound completely mad."

"At least I'm not talking about dating Draco Malfoy!"

"That's because he'd never have you, you're not his type. And you're wrong about him."

"Oh?" said Ron, looking furious, "and how is that?"

"He'd never dye his hair blue, he's far too vain," said Hermione, turned around, and walked into the girls' dormitory. Ron stood on the stairs, feeling extraordinarily irritated as the realization dawned on him that he hadn't gotten any sort of answer to his question.

As soon as the others had gone, Madam Pomfrey set to work healing the last of Draco's cuts and bruises. Half-asleep, eyes shut, he could feel light touches on his face, his neck and shoulders, as she healed the grazes and gashes there, the black eye and cut lip the Death Eaters had given him. She moved down to his sprained wrist and fixed that, too. Then she reached for his cut-open hand.

"No," said Draco, pulling it back. "Leave it alone."

Madam Pomfrey was startled to see that his eyes were open, but didn't show it. "Don't be ridiculous," she said. "That's quite a deep cut, you'll have a scar there."

"I said leave it alone," said Draco, giving her what he hoped was a threatening look.

"You want the scar?" she asked in disbelief.

He brought his hand up to his chest and curled it into a fist. "Just leave it," he said again.

"Fine," said Madam Pomfrey, shaking her head. As she moved on to the scratches and cuts on his legs and feet, Draco brought his hand up to his face and squinted at it. Harry had cut a deep and jagged line across his palm, slashing side-to-side. It was hard to say in the dim light, but if he squinted at it, it looked a little like a bolt of lightning.

Exhausted as she was, Hermione found that there was little chance she would be able to get any sleep before telling the entire story of what had happened to Lavender and Parvati, who greeted her arrival with screams of happiness. Not, Hermione thought dourly as she sat in bed in her pyjamas (Narcissa's beautiful but now quite destroyed satin dress was folded neatly on her dresser) because they were so happy to see her, but because they were looking forward to some really good gossip.

"You kissed Draco Malfoy in a WARDROBE?" Lavender demanded, when Hermione was finally finished.

"Well, that wasn't really the point of the story," said Hermione, "but yes."

"But he's so...evil," said Parvati, her mouth open.

"Yet oddly attractive," said Lavender, beginning to giggle. "Come on, Parvati...he is cute...I've never seen anyone else with hair that color. Like Christmas tinsel."

"I guess," said Parvati, looking unconvinced.

"Did he get all sweaty?" asked Lavender. "Did he take off any of his clothes?"

"LAVENDER," howled Hermione. "I'M NOT TELLING YOU THAT."

"Well, how about Harry?" asked Lavender unrepentantly. "How about kissing him? Was it great?"

Hermione pondered whether kissing Harry could be called 'great'. It had been shattering, heart-breaking, wonderful and awful at the same time. Was that 'great'?

"It was okay," she said.

Lavender rolled her eyes. "*That's* exciting," she said.

Parvati said, curiously, "So are you going out with Draco now?"

Hermione considered this. "I don't know," she said.

"But you aren't going out with Harry," said Lavender, in an offhand tone.

"He's not speaking to me," said Hermione. "So that would be a no. We're not going out, and," she added, with a pang, "I doubt we ever will be."

"Well," Lavender said, with slight hesitation, "since it didn't work out with you and Harry, I was wondering...if you'd mind...if I asked him out."

Hermione stared at Lavender with her mouth open. "Lavender! Honestly!"

Lavender didn't seem abashed. "I recognize you haven't done a lot of dating, Hermione," she said coolly, "so you might not know how this works. I can't speak for everyone, but I've stayed away from Harry for the past few years because we knew you liked him and we thought he liked you. Now, though..."

"What'd you think, Hermione?" snorted Parvati. "Harry's famous, he's rich, he's good-looking and he's nice, too. Plus he's saved the world, oh, five or six times now. Of course, he's a terrible dancer," she added thoughtfully, "but most people don't know that."

"And our last year is coming up," said Lavender. "We're going to need partners for the Yule Ball, for the Seventh Years' Dance, and Harry'll be Quidditch Captain by then..."

"And whoever goes with Harry'll probably get their picture in Witch Weekly," chimed in Parvati.

Hermione looked at them both as if they had suddenly turned into werewolves. "Are you telling me," said Hermione, "that from now on it's open season on Harry?"

"Well," said Parvati, "pretty much, yes."

Hermione realized that after six years of hanging out almost exclusively with Harry and Ron, she obviously didn't know the first thing about other girls. She gazed at Lavender in mute horror, and Lavender gazed back, looking sympathetic but firm. "I'm sorry, Hermione," she said. "But you really shouldn't care...should you?"

* * *

Hermione slept through that day and most of the next. When she finally got up and went down to lunch on wobbly legs, she found that the world she had known had changed overnight.

There was never any point trying to keep secrets at Hogwarts. Especially when they had to do with Harry. Everyone knew what had happened, where Harry and Hermione and Ron had gone, that Draco Malfoy's father was in jail, that Draco had nearly died, and that he and Hermione were now rumored to be, if not going out, at least seeing each other.

When she walked into the Great Hall, everyone turned and stared at her. She looked, out of habit, immediately for Ron and Harry. She found them, sitting at the Gryffindor table with Fred and George. When they saw her, Ron gave her a nervous smile.

But Harry looked away.

Hermione bit her lip hard. She would not cry. She looked away from them -and saw Draco. He was sitting at the Slytherin table, taking up three seats with his long legs as usual. When he caught sight of her, he smiled.

That decided it. Without even thinking about it, she walked across the hall and sat down next to him.

She heard the hissing buzz of voices that raced around the room like wildfire, but she didn't care. She was just happy to see Draco. His left hand was wrapped in white bandages but other than that he looked as healthy as he ever had.

"Hey," he said, as she sat down next to him, and he folded up the Daily Prophet he had been reading. "Do you know what I've been thinking?"

"No," she said, smiling.

"What to name our first child," he said. "I suppose that depends on whether it's a boy or a girl. If it's a boy, I was thinking Draco Junior. Or we could always name it Harry, just to confuse old Four-Eyes. He'd never know what to make of it."

"Draco..." she spluttered, then saw that he was grinning, and threw a waffle at him.

He ducked it. "Sorry," he said. "But you should hear the way everyone's talking. They seem to think we've had the Romance of the Century, not just a few kisses in a musty wardrobe."

"Oh..." Hermione put her hands over her face. "How does everyone find out about these things?"

Draco shrugged. "I have no idea. But I will tell you that it got rid of Pansy Parkinson for me, for which I will be eternally grateful. She came up to me this morning in hysterics and demanded to know if it was true. Of course I told her it was, figuring that anything that got her so upset had to be good. So she told me she was never speaking to me again."

He grinned and flipped open the Daily Prophet again. Hermione caught sight of the front page of the paper, and gazed at it in shock. LUCIUS MALFOY ARRESTED; CHARGED. She caught sight of some of the words in the smaller text: "Illegal use of Epicyclical Charms", "kidnap and torture", "testimony by Narcissa Malfoy," "sentencing to follow."

Draco followed her gaze, and put the paper down.

"Sorry," she said, looking up at him. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said, and he looked it. "I got a letter from my mother yesterday. She pretty much told me everything that was going to happen. So I'm not surprised. And," he added, "he's not going to Azkaban."

"Good," said Hermione, although privately she thought Lucius deserved Azkaban more than anyone she'd ever met. Glancing up and down the Slytherin table, she saw people looking quickly away. "Everyone's staring at me," she said under her breath to Draco.

"That's because you're the girl who dumped Harry Potter for Draco Malfoy," he said cheerfully. "Whether you knew it or not."

"Great," she said. "Now I've had two imaginary boyfriends. All the trouble, none of the benefits."

"You want benefits?" said Draco, looking at her with a curious smile.

Hermione went as red as if she had been dipped in boiling water. "Um," she said.

"Come on," he said, and held out a hand to her. "Let's take a walk down to the lake. I want to show you something."

"Um," she said again.

"Not that kind of thing," he grinned.

"Okay," she said, put down her plate, and followed him out of the hall.

* * *

Harry and Ron watched her go, Ron with bemusement, Harry with quite a different expression.

"So," he said, "I guess this makes me Just Stood Back Like A Prat And Watched Her Go Off With Malfoy Guy, after all."

"Oh, no," said Ron cheerfully. "I'm proud to say you didn't stand back. You went bravely forward, and made a huge idiot out of yourself, and she still went off with Malfoy."

"Thank you, Ron," said Harry.

"But at least you took action," Ron said.

"That's me. Action Guy."

"Actually," pointed out George, "strictly speaking, it would be Malfoy who's getting the action here."

Harry dropped his fork. "Would you NOT say things like that around me?" he said accusingly to George.

"Sorry," said George, but his mouth was twitching with laughter. He held his plate up over his face to cover his expression. So did Fred.

"Why is my suffering so amusing?" Harry wondered out loud.

"That should be obvious," said Ron.

Harry turned and looked at him. "Yes?"

"Because it's unnecessary," said Ron. "She does love you, you stupid idiot. You're just being bloody-minded, and not speaking to her, so what d'you expect her to do? Especially with Malfoy oozing the old Harry Potter charm all over her, you know, whatever it was he picked up from you when you were under the Potion."

"I don't know," said Harry thoughtfully, "I think it's all him now, actually."

"You mean you think he really loves her?" asked Ron, looking astonished.

"Yeah," said Harry. "I do."

"In that case," announced George, "you really are in trouble, Harry."

Fred was grinning again. "Think of that time Malfoy asked you if you'd kill him. Bet you wish you had that moment to live over again, don't you?"

"With you two for friends, who needs misery and self-loathing?" asked Harry rhetorically, glaring at them.

"And when did you get so *sarcastic*?" said George, giving Harry a hard look. "You sound like-"

"Malfoy," said Fred.

They all looked at Harry consideringly.

"So it looks like Malfoy's been left with the aftereffects of your nice-guy personality," said Fred, after a pause. "And you-"

"Have been left with an extremely bad temper," finished George.

"I think we can say that Malfoy is the clear winner in this scenario," said Fred.

"Yeah," said Harry, looking towards the door through which Draco and Hermione had gone. "Tell me something I don't know."



It was a beautiful sunny day. Draco and Hermione skirted the lake and headed for a small copse of trees. They were walking near where the second task had taken place in their fourth year. Hermione wondered if Draco knew it.

He stopped under one of the trees, and said, "Come here."

She came and stood next to him, so close her arm was touching his.

"Watch this," he said, and pointed his left hand at the base of the tree.

Nothing happened. "Oops," he said. "I forgot. The bandages interfere."

He pointed his other hand at the base of the tree, and this time something happened. There was a noise like a guitar string being plucked, and the earth at the base of the tree moved. As Hermione watched in astonishment, a green shoot poked its way out of the ground, rocketed upward, and in seconds was putting forth petals. Within moments, it had become a black rose. The only black rose Hermione had ever seen.

She looked at Draco with her mouth open. "Is that...how did you...?"

He grinned at her. "It's a Magid thing," he said. "I practiced all morning. You like?"

"I've never even seen a black rose before," she said, bending to examine it.

"I don't seem to be able to get flowers in any other color," he said, shrugging. "I guess it's because I'm not a flowers kind of guy. I seem to be pretty good at

growing Venus Flytraps, and I managed to make it hail, but flowers...not so much."

"You made it hail?"

"Well, just in a very small area. And the hail was black, too."

"Don't you think it's dangerous using your Magid skills when you haven't had any training?" said Hermione, knowing she sounded bossy, but, as usual, not being able to help it.

"Probably," said Draco. "I suppose it could have hailed anvils. But I'm not too worried. Don't you like your flower?" he added, sounding anxious.

Hermione plucked it out of the ground, and stood up, holding it between her fingers gingerly. It had quite a lot of big, sharp thorns. "I do like it," she said, looking up at him. "It's all thorny and prickly. Kind of like you."

He bent and kissed the side of her mouth, and his silver hair brushed her cheek like butterfly wings. She inhaled the scent of him - coffee and limes and pepper and maple syrup from breakfast.

Then she pulled away. "I can't," she said.

"Why NOT?" said Draco, for one moment sounding less like a supremely self-possessed Malfoy and more like an irritable sixteen-year-old boy.

"I don't know what's going on with me and Harry."

"A big lot of nothing," said Draco, "that seems to be what's going on with you and Harry. Or am I wrong?"

"No," she said slowly. "No. You're not wrong. But I can't do anything with you while he's not speaking to me, because... because..."

"Because you want his blessing?" said Draco.

She was surprised to realize that this might be true. "I think so," she said.

"In that case," said Draco, "we'll be dating when you're thirty."

"Just give me some time," she said, looking up at him pleadingly.

He threw up his hands. "Okay," he said. "Time."

* * *

Hermione had never realized that the simple fact that she was always with Harry had convinced most of the school that they were, in truth, an item. (The frequent Witch Weekly articles claiming that she and Harry were together hadn't hurt, either.) Now that there were rumors about her and Draco, and she and Harry were no longer friends, girls started oozing out of the woodwork at an incredible rate.

Oozing all over Harry.

Suddenly there were girls at Quidditch practice, girls at the Gryffindor table, girls waiting outside classes in the hallway. It seemed like every time she saw Harry he was surrounded by girls. Tall girls, short girls, she even saw Moaning Myrtle trying to get his attention near the bathroom one day. It began to seem like she was the only girl at Hogwarts who wasn't constantly talking to Harry.

It was like walking around in a nightmare. Everywhere she went she saw Harry - after all, they were in the same house, and had most classes together - but he wouldn't speak to her or even look at her, and he was always surrounded by girls.

If it hadn't been for Draco, Hermione would have been completely miserable. He always seemed happy to see her, and was remarkably easy to be around. He introduced her to his Slytherin friends, which was interesting. Crabbe was so shocked to be introduced to Hermione that he spit crackers all over her, and Goyle simply stood and looked at her with his mouth wide open. Pansy Parkinson burst into tears every time Hermione walked by her, and Hermione flatly refused to be introduced to Millicent Bulstrode, as the memory of the headlock Millicent had put her into in second year still stung. Some of the other Slytherins weren't so bad, but Hermione didn't feel comfortable around them.

"Whenever they look at me," she said to Parvati - she would have preferred to talk to Ron, but since he was always with Harry, that was nearly impossible - "I feel like they're mentally sharpening knives in my direction."

"They're not the nicest people, that's true," agreed Parvati, who was applying an eyelash-lengthening charm in front of the mirror in their dormitory room. "But surely they can't all be worthless, can they?"

"Aside from Draco, you mean?" said Hermione, who was lying on the bed watching Parvati.

"Well, obviously, since you're dating him."

"We are NOT dating," protested Hermione.

"You're not?" Parvati was so astonished she accidentally elongated her eyelashes to nearly a foot in length, and Hermione had to help her shrink them back. When this process was finished, Parvati repeated her question, and Hermione sighed.

"We're not," she said. "We're just friends."

"You want to know something, Hermione?" said Parvati earnestly. "You being friends with Draco Malfoy...that's even weirder than you dating him."

"Why?" asked Hermione curiously.

"Well, if you were dating him, I could put it down to uncontrollable physical attraction. I mean, he is cute. That's a fact. But if you're just friends with him..." Parvati shrugged. "You must actually like him."

Hermione rolled over on her bed and looked up at the ceiling. "I do like him," she said.

"Despite the fact that he's spoiled, selfish, has a bad temper and a mean sense of humor, likes to pick on people who are weaker than him and.." Parvati trailed off at the look on Hermione's face. "Well, he does," she said.

"I know," said Hermione. "Not so much as before, but...he's a good person really, Parvati."

Parvati turned around and looked at Hermione, hard. "Then why aren't you dating him?"

"Because..."

"Because he's not Harry," said Parvati, showing a rare amount of insight.

Hermione turned over on the bed restlessly. "Not any more," she said.

* * *

"Oh, go on, Ron," said Harry crossly. "Just do it."

"I will NOT," replied Ron, sounding equally cross. He was hovering in midair on his broomstick over the Quidditch field, facing Harry, who was sitting astride his Firebolt with his arms crossed and looking furious. They'd been engaged in flying practice for about an hour before Harry had made his rather peculiar request of Ron, and both boys were flushed and irritable. Harry's white shirt was sticking to his back with sweat.

"Why not?" Harry snapped. "Just knock me off my broomstick. Come on, have a go!"

"Why not?" echoed Ron in disbelief. "How about because I don't want to spend the rest of term explaining to Dumbledore why I murdered you in cold blood for no apparent reason?"

"Dumbledore said the Magid power would manifest itself if I faced danger," said Harry. "It won't work if I just jump off my broom. I have to be scared. And if you won't help, I'll just go into the Forbidden Forest and feed myself to Aragog."

"Harry," said Ron desperately, "Dumbledore also said that the power manifests itself between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. You're only sixteen. Give it a rest already!"

"Malfoy's only sixteen, too-"

"Oh, shut up about Malfoy!" yelled Ron in a rage. "I'm sick of hearing about him! Just because he's dating Hermione doesn't mean I'm going to help you kill yourself!"

Harry's eyes narrowed to angry green slits. He seized his wand, and before Ron knew what was happening, Harry had pointed the wand at him and shouted "*Rapido!*"

Ron's broom shot forward uncontrollably, Ron barely hanging onto it, and plowed into Harry, knocking him sideways off his Firebolt. Ron, hardly managing to

steady his own broomstick, saw Harry plummeting to the ground. He grabbed for his wand, aimed it at the rapidly falling Harry, and hissed, "*Wingardium leviosa!*"

Harry, who hadn't made a sound while he was falling, yelped as his flight was arrested ten feet from the ground. He hung there in midair, looking reproachfully at Ron. "Idiot," muttered Ron, and moved his wand so that it was no longer pointing at Harry.

Harry fell the remaining ten feet and landed on the bare ground of the Quidditch field.

Ron sighed, pointed his broomstick downward, and came to a swooshing halt next to Harry, who was lying spread-eagled on the ground, staring up at the sky and looking as if he never intended to get up.

"Zero," said Harry glumly. "Zip. Nada. I have NO Magid powers. At least, not at the moment."

"Harry," said Ron, getting off his broom, "has it occurred to you that wanting to be able to turn Draco Malfoy into a slug and step on him is not a good enough reason for your Magid powers to start working?"

Harry put his hands over his face and said something that sounded like "Urgh."

"There must some other way to get your powers working," said Ron, "Some way that doesn't involve you risking your life."

"I've been reading up on it," said Harry. "Salazar Slytherin's powers kicked in when he had to face a dragon that was threatening his village. But that was a zillion years ago, when there were still lots of dragon roaming around. The dark wizard Grindelwald, his powers kicked in during some kind of battle, which is also no go, and Rowena Ravenclaw's started when she was struck by lightning. Which is hard to arrange."

"Harry..." said Ron slowly. "You need to talk to Hermione, that's what you need to do."

Harry parted his fingers and looked up at Ron with suspicious green eyes. "Why?"

"Because she's your best friend, dolt," said Ron. "Because you miss her and it's making you nuts."

"Whenever I see her," said Harry, taking his hands away from his face, "I want to be sick."

"Now *that's* romantic," said Ron.

"Whenever I see her with Malfoy, I want to be sick," Harry clarified.

"Well, you'll have to get used to it eventually," said Ron.

"I don't want to get used to it," said Harry, sitting up abruptly. "I want my Magid powers to start working, that's what I want."

"That's magic," said Ron, not without sympathy. "What you've got is heartbreak. Magic won't fix that."

* * *

"I was thinking about this summer, Hermione," said Draco.

It was breakfast time. They were sitting together at the Slytherin table. (It was Hermione's fourth breakfast with the Slytherins. She was even beginning to get used to the sound of Goyle slurping and spitting at every mealtime.) Draco was eating toast with shocking rapidity - Hermione had already found out that he was one of those boys who could eat anything and everything and remain skinny - and Hermione, who didn't have much appetite, was nibbling on some pumpkin seeds.

"What about it?" she asked.

"Well, I know we were talking about me visiting you at your parents' house. And I do still want to, but my mum wrote and reminded me that my Uncle Vlad was saying he was hoping I'd come see him this summer, he's got a massive castle in Romania, and I thought, if you wanted..."

Surreptitiously, Hermione squinted across the room at the Gryffindor table. She could see Harry, sitting with Ron; Lavender was on one side of him, and Parvati was sitting next to Ron. As Hermione watched, Lavender speared a piece of toast on her fork and offered it to Harry.

Harry ate it.

Lavender giggled.

"Meanwhile," continued Draco, "I've dropped out of Hogwarts and become a hired assassin for the Ministry of Magic."

"Wha-what?" spluttered Hermione, turning to look at him.

He was smiling, but the smile didn't reach his gray eyes. "Hermione, love," he said, pointing. "Are you really going to eat all of those?"

She looked where he indicated, and jumped. Somehow she had managed to shell a pile of at least a hundred pumpkin seeds. The seeds themselves lay in one neat pile, the shells in another. She couldn't remember having shelled even one seed.

"Oh," she said sheepishly. "I'll, um, save them for later, I think."

"Okay, that does it," said Draco, and stood up.

Alarmed, Hermione stood up too. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm a bit easily distracted these days -"

"I've noticed that," said Draco. "It's all right. I just remembered something I've been meaning to do. I've been putting it off, but now seems like a good time to get it over with."

"Can I help?" she asked, feeling guilty.

"Definitely not," he said.

He reached out and touched her very lightly on the cheek. Then he dropped his hand.

"I've got Quidditch practice this afternoon," he said. "I'll see you at dinner."

* * *

Harry had arranged to be sitting alone in the Gryffindor common room that afternoon. He was therefore astonished when the portrait hole opened and Draco Malfoy stepped through it. He straightened up and surveyed the shocked Harry serenely.

"I can't believe the password is still 'boomslang'," he said, and flopped down in an armchair. He stretched his long legs out towards the fire. "You Gryffindors are a trusting lot."

Harry lowered the book he was holding and looked anxiously around. "You want to be a bit more careful, Malfoy," he said. "If other people knew you had the password..."

"I don't want to be a bit more careful," said Draco. "I want to beat you around the head with a broomstick. But I won't, of course."

"Why not?" said Harry, returning to his book. "You can borrow my Firebolt 5000." He glanced over at Draco. "Incidentally, why the sudden outbreak of hostility? Shouldn't I be the one who's currently hating you?"

"No," said Draco. "I should be hating you, for the simple reason that you're making Hermione very unhappy."

Harry dropped his book again, and glared at Draco. His cheeks were flushed with anger. "You came to talk me about her?"

"That's right," said Draco.

"I've got a better idea," said Harry. "Why don't you just get the hell out of here?"

"See, I know this girl, Hermione, " said Draco, as if Harry hadn't spoken. "And she's a wonderful girl to be around. Smart-really smart-pretty, too. One of the bravest people I've ever met." He was gazing off over Harry's head now. "Only thing is, I have this feeling she's really unhappy about something. She cries when she thinks I'm not looking. She stares off into space a lot. And whenever you're around..." Draco looked directly at Harry now. "She watches you."

The flush was beginning to recede from Harry's face. Now he looked startled. "She won't even talk to me," he said.

"No," said Draco. "You won't talk to her."

Harry looked at him wonderingly. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I don't know," said Draco thoughtfully. "The only way I can do this sort of thing is to tell myself I'm not doing it. Right now I'm telling myself I've come here to talk to you about what an annoying bastard you are. It's working so far."

"Is she really unhappy?" asked Harry in a hushed voice.

"Miserable," said Draco. "Look, Potter. I'm asking you. Talk to her. You're her best friend. Or you were."

The flush was quite gone from Harry's face and now he looked pale and unhappy. "I can't," he said.

"Oh, yes you can," said Draco, whose temper was beginning to fray. "What are you afraid of, anyway?"

"That she was right," said Harry. "I took her for granted, all these years I took her for granted completely. She should make me pay. And pay. There's just not enough pay--"

"Look," interrupted Draco, "you want to wallow in guilt, I'm all for that. Knock yourself out. But," and now he leaned forward and glared at Harry, "I won't be second-best. I won't be with her because she can't be with you."

"Harry?" said a voice that sounded like it was coming from behind the chair.

Harry spun around, looking startled. "Sirius!" he said. "I nearly forgot I arranged to talk him now."

He got out of the chair he was sitting in and went to kneel by the fireplace. Draco followed him and saw that Sirius' head was floating in the fire. Sirius' wild dark hair had been clipped, he was clean-shaven, and he looked neater and more groomed than either of them had ever seen him.

"Sirius," said Harry in pleasure, reaching out a hand as if he could shake Sirius'. As he did, Draco saw the scar on Harry's palm, the twin of his own. Apparently he hadn't gotten it healed either.

"Lookin' sharp, Sirius," said Draco cordially, dropping to his knees next to Harry.

An expression of pleasure at seeing Draco flitted quickly across Sirius' face, to be replaced by something that looked like alarm. "I didn't know both of you would be here," he said to Harry.

"Sorry," said Harry. "I put a Barring Charm on the doors to discourage anyone from coming in, but it didn't work on Malfoy. Typical," he added, glaring at Draco.

"You'll just have to take my being a Magid-- and therefore way better than you-- into account from now on, Potter," said Draco.

"I'm a Magid as well as you, git," said Harry, sounding vexed.

"So you say," said Draco with a tone of great superiority. "But what have you *done*?"

"Stop that!" said Sirius irritably. "You two bicker like an old married couple." Harry and Draco let out identical yells of horror. "Right, then," said Sirius. "Never mind what I was going to say. I'm clearing off. Harry, I'll send you an owl."

And he vanished.

"*Sirius?*" said Harry, in blank astonishment. Then he turned on Draco, "Thanks a lot, Malfoy."

But Draco was looking thoughtful. "I wonder what it was he had to tell you?"

Harry sat back against the legs of an overstuffed armchair and shook his head. "Well, I'll have to wait for his owl now," he said irritably. "Why don't you get out of here, Malfoy? You're giving me a headache."

"Fine," said Draco, standing up. "Oh. One thing, Potter."

"What's that?"

"It's not in my nature to be self-sacrificing," said Draco matter-of-factly. "I don't know if this is just some lingering vestige of that Polyjuice spell or what. But if it is, and this generous phase that I am in passes, and you are still making Hermione miserable, then I will come back here and I will yank out your ribcage and wear it as a hat. Understood?"

"Understood," said Harry, grinning despite himself. "And a big gold star for imagery."

"Thanks," said Draco, and went out through the portrait hole.

* * *

The next day, it rained, complete with thunder, lightning and a sky that looked like wet black iron. Which went well with Hermione's mood. She sat in the common room, curled in an armchair, staring moodily at the spluttering fire. She wondered vaguely where Crookshanks was. It would have been nice to have a cat to curl up on her lap right about now.

The portrait door opened and Ron stepped into the room, shaking water from his robes. "Hey, Ron," said Hermione, glad to see him without Harry. Then she saw how anxious and worried he looked, and paused. "Ron, is everything all right?"

"I'm not sure," he said.

She gave him a hard look. "Where's Harry?"

"I went with Harry to Quidditch practice," said Ron slowly, "But they cut it short because of the weather. You don't want to play Quidditch in a lightning storm."

"Obviously," said Hermione.

"Anyway, we were halfway back - I was talking to Fred and George - and I turned around and Harry was ...well, gone."

"Gone?" repeated Hermione in disbelief. "He *vanished*?"

"Not vanished. Alicia Spinnet said she saw him racing off towards the Forbidden Forest."

"Well..." said Hermione, unhappily, "he must have had a reason..."

"That's what worries me," said Ron. "His reason."

Hermione was about to ask what he meant, when the portrait swung open again and Draco stepped through.

Ron did not look happy to see him. "Speak of the incredibly annoying person," he said. Despite all that had happened, Hermione knew, Ron and his brothers still did not like Draco and never would. "You can't just keep waltzing in and out of our common room, you know, you'll get caught."

"Were you talking about me?" said Draco, unruffled. "Because I heard a bit of your conversation, and it rather sounded as if you were talking about Harry. Gone and done something stupid again, has he?"

"Yes, and it's all your fault," said Ron, rather unreasonably.

"My fault? How is it my fault?"

"It's this whole..." Ron made a sweeping gesture, "Magid thing. He can't bear it that your powers work and his don't yet, okay? He's been doing everything he possibly can to try to jump-start them. He asked me to knock him off his broom..."

"He did what?" demanded Hermione.

"You heard me," said Ron. "And he's been reading up on Magids and their history, and it was talking about how various Magids got their powers, and one of them, I think it was Rowena Ravenclaw, was out in a storm and she got hit by lightning and -- "

Hermione bolted out of her seat. "You think he's gone off to try to get himself struck by lightning?"

"Even Harry isn't that big of a git," said Draco.

"Not usually," agreed Ron, "but he hasn't been at all himself lately. It's your fault," he said, turning on Hermione, "going around with Malfoy, all kissy-kissy--"

"There has been no kissy," said Hermione, strung by this injustice. "Has there?" she said, turning to Draco.

"Most unfortunately not," he agreed.

Ron looked unconvinced.

"Are you saying that Harry's gone off in the middle of a thunderstorm to try to activate his Magid powers in order to make some kind of point about Draco and me?" demanded Hermione incredulously.

"He misses you, Hermione," said Ron.

"And nothing says 'I love you' like reducing yourself to a smoldering pile of ashes," added Draco.

Hermione turned on him in a fury. "You are *not* helping!" she shouted.

"Look," said Draco, surprised by her vehemence, "we don't KNOW that that's what he's gone off to do, do we?"

"Well, what else would it be?" said Hermione, now nearly in tears. She stood up and began checking her pockets for her wand. "I'm going after him," she said. "You two do what you like."

She found her wand, and headed for the portrait. Draco followed her. "I'll come with you," he said.

Ron shook his head. "I'm staying here in case he comes back," he said.

"Fine," said Hermione to both of them, and commenced running down the hall. Draco, having much longer legs than she did, barely had to run to keep up with her.

"Hermione," he said, as they skidded around a corner, "calm down, would you?"

"You don't understand," she said. "This is all my fault."

They raced down the wide staircase and out the front doors of the castle.

And ran smack into Harry.

He was soaking wet, his shirt and pants were plastered to him, and his hair hung in dripping black swatches over his forehead, but he seemed otherwise completely healthy. He was wearing his school robes over his Quidditch clothes. And he was carrying a wet Crookshanks in his arms.

"*Harry*," said Hermione, half in tears, "Are you all right? Are you all right?"

Harry looked at them both blankly. "I'm fine," he said to her. "Your cat managed to get himself wedged up a drainpipe. I heard him yowling on the way back from practice, so I went and got him out."

Crookshanks wiggled in Harry's arms, making a drenched sort of purring noise.

"He's too fat," said Harry dispassionately. "You ought to stop feeding him so much."

Thunder rumbled overhead, and a fresh downpour threatened to empty itself over them. Crookshanks looked anxious.

"We should get inside," said Draco, and started backing up the steps. Hermione followed, and more slowly, Harry.

Once they were inside, Crookshanks squirmed out of Harry's grasp, landed on the floor, and scampered off to dry out. Hermione and Draco, neither of whom were as wet as Harry, shivered. And Harry just stood there, a widening pool of water spreading out from his drenched robes and shoes.

"Why did you two come haring after me like that?" he said, in a colorless sort of voice. "And why were you asking if I was all right?"

"Um," said Hermione, now feeling very stupid indeed. "We should get you back to Gryffindor Tower, Harry...you're all wet..."

Harry narrowed his eyes at her, but commenced walking up the stairs. They followed. "That's not an answer," he said, turning a corner.

"Hermione thought you were going off to get yourself struck by lightning," said Draco drily. "To get your Magic powers working. I said, let him, but she would go after you."

Harry stopped and stared at her. "Struck by lightning?" he said. "What kind of idiot do you think I am?"

Her temper flared. "I don't know, Harry," she snapped. "The kind of idiot who tries to get Ron to knock him off his broomstick?"

"Ron has a big mouth," said Harry shortly, then stopped and stared. Hermione turned to see what he was staring at, and saw him looking through a half-open doorway into a darkened room, through which she could see the faint glimmering of glass.

"It isn't..." said Harry. "It can't be..."

"What?" asked Hermione, bewildered, but Harry had already squelched past her and pushed the door open. He walked in, and Hermione and Draco, casting each other anxious glances, followed.

It was a room Hermione didn't remember ever seeing before. Large and dimly-lit, one whole wall was windows, now showing the stormy half-darkness outside. On the other wall hung the object that had given off the flash of light Hermione had seen. It was a mirror. Round, with a dark wood border. It was very plain, yet seemed to cast a glow in the half-light.

Harry walked up to it, and gazed up at it as if it held all the secrets of the universe. Water was pattering steadily from his hair, his trousers, the drenched hem of his robes, but he took no notice.

"Harry?" said Hermione uncertainly, and walked up behind him. He didn't turn, didn't even seem to hear her approaching. "Harry," she said, "What are you looking at?"

"Us," he said. "I see you and me."

Hermione looked up into the mirror and saw herself and Harry looking back. "So do I," she said. "Big deal, Harry. It's just a mirror."



"It's not -" he began indignantly, then turned to look at her. His eyes were wide. "What did you say you saw?"

"You and me," she said, wonderingly. "There we are," she said, pointing up at the mirror. Then she squinted. There was something about the reflection of her and Harry - something strange.

"What about now?" said Harry, backing away from her by about ten feet. "What do you see?"

She glanced back up at the mirror. And her heart turned over. "Still you and me," she said, her voice catching. "Only Harry - in the mirror, you're dry. And you've got -" She broke off, turning to him. "What kind of mirror is this?"

"Read the inscription," said Harry, who was looking astonished, although not as unhappy as he had been.

Hermione read it. *Erised stra eh ruoyt ubsi tahwt onuoy wohsi.*

Since Hermione was a deal brighter than Harry, it took her only a moment to realize the inscription was written backwards.

I show you not what is but your heart's desire.

"You told me about this mirror," she said slowly, "years ago...it shows you your family, Harry..."

"It used to," he said. "I still see them. Only I see us in the foreground. I guess," he said, "a person's heart's desire can change."

He was very pale, but he was looking at her, really looking at her, as he hadn't looked at her in days.

Behind him, she saw Draco cross the room to the door, and walk out. Her heart contracted. But she couldn't leave. This was her life, right here in this room.

The door shut behind him, and she turned to Harry.

"The mirror shows you what you want," she said slowly.

Harry nodded.

"But didn't Dumbledore tell you that most people want what's worst for them?"

"Most people," said Harry. "Not everybody." He looked at her steadily. "Do you love me?" he said.

"Of course I love you," she said. "My whole life I've never loved anyone like I love you. But you scare me, Harry. You can hurt me so easily. That's why I like being with Draco. He wouldn't hurt me, and anyway, he can't."

Harry spun around, walked a few paces away from her, then turned to face her. "It's funny," he said, "but I was talking to Malfoy yesterday, and I actually realized something. I realized I owe you an apology."

She stared at him. He was so pale that his eyes seemed the only color in his white face. He said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I never told you I loved you. I'm sorry I waited until it looked like I might lose you before I did anything. I'm sorry I lied to you when you asked me if I loved you. I just never thought of it like that. You've always been like a part of me, like how I can do magic. I never sit around thinking about how I love being able to do magic, what it means to me. It's just a part of my life. But if I lost it -- if I couldn't do magic anymore --" He broke off. "I'm not like Malfoy. I don't make fancy speeches. But I know what I feel."

Hermione just stared at him. She couldn't say a word. Couldn't even think a word.

"I want you to be happy," he said slowly. "And if I don't make you happy, then you should be with the person who does."

He looked at her. Harry. Who she had always loved, not because he was brave, although he was, or clever, although he was that too, or a good dancer (which he wasn't) - but because he was kind, with the sort of kindness so rare among most people, and teenage boys in particular - kindness that not only gives, but gives up.

"He really does love you," he said. "Not like I do, but -"

He broke off, turned, and walked towards the door. He was going to leave, she knew, because once Harry made up his mind to do something he did it. And when he said something, he meant it. And then she thought about what he had said, and what it would be like to live the rest of her life without him in it.

"Harry," she said, pushing herself off the wall and taking a step towards him. "Please come back."

He turned around. She couldn't see his face, he was standing in a patch of shadow. She could see only the ghostly whiteness of his shirt and the pallor of his skin.

"Please come back," she said again.

He came back. And stood in front of her, looking at her.

And then there were hands on her shoulders, Harry's hands, and he was kissing her. And when she put her arms around him, he was soaking wet and the water chilled her through her clothes and his skin was cold as ice but his hands when he touched her burned. He tasted like rainwater and tears.

She fell back against the wall, still kissing him. Her hands were shaking and there was a humming in her ears that slowly intensified in pitch until it became music - the most beautiful music she had ever heard.

She broke away from Harry, astonished, and saw by the expression on his face that he heard it too.

"What is that?" she said in wonder.

"Phoenix song," he said, looking equally amazed.

"Where's it coming from?" she asked, half turning to look around her. It was hard to see anything through the falling snow.

"Um," said Harry, looking sheepish now. "Me, I think."

"Harry," she said then, in a deadly quiet voice, "it's snowing."

"I know," he said, looking even more sheepish.

"Inside? In June?"

"Well," said Harry, now rather pink around the ears, "Dumbledore did say 'strong emotion' would activate my Magid powers."

"They're working?"

"Yeah," he said, looking bewildered but happy. "I felt it. Like a light switch turning on. I guess I just don't know exactly how to..."

"Control them yet?" she said, grinning, as several baby owls fell, hooting, from the ceiling.

"Yeah," he said, grinning back.

"I didn't know you liked owls so much," she said, as several more hurtled out of the sky.

"Kiss me again," he suggested. "Maybe we'll get canaries."

"Harry," she said, kissing him again, "did you know it's snowing blue snow?"

"I like blue," said Harry. "It's my favorite color."

"Blue snow?"

"Why not blue snow?"

"You always did say you thought snow was romantic," said Hermione, giggling.

"Just be glad I'm not Hagrid," said Harry, pulling her in for another kiss. "It'd be raining Blast-Ended Skrewts."

"I need to go talk to Draco," she said, some timeless time later when they had left the mirror room and were walking back along the corridor. Harry's wet shoes were squelching with every step, but he was still looking enormously pleased with the world and everything in it.

"I know," he said. "I should talk to him, too."

"But I should go first," she said.

"All right," he said, letting go of her hand. "But no suddenly deciding you're really in love with him after all," he added, warningly. "I can't take any more of that."

"If I have any doubts I can always go back to the mirror," she said teasingly, backing along the corridor. "If I can find it again, of course."

"Don't test me, Hermione," he said. "I've got blue snow all down the back of my shirt and owl feathers in my hair. I'm already cranky."

But he was smiling. She blew a kiss at him and dashed off down the hall. As soon as she was out of Harry's sight, she slowed to a walk and took the Epicyclical Charm out of her shirt. This, she knew, was cheating, but she really wanted to find Draco and couldn't imagine where he might be.

She concentrated, thinking very hard of Draco, picturing him as clearly as she could...his familiar face, light eyes and silver hair, narrow sideways smile...and the charm gave a gentle little tug. She took a step forward, and it tugged again.

Following the gentle tugging, Hermione made her way out of the castle and down to the lake. It had stopped raining, but everything was still very wet. She followed the tugging around to the small grove of trees where Draco had grown her the black rose two days before.

Draco was there, standing with his back to a tree, staring out at the lake. Raindrops, caught in the leaves and branches, made a shimmering silver cage around him.

She came up behind him and put her hand lightly on his arm. "Hey," she said.

He didn't turn around.

"You don't have to tell me," he said. "I already know."

"Draco," she said.

Now he turned, and looked at her. His expression was unreadable. If she hadn't come to know him well, she wouldn't even have thought he was upset. "It turns out," he said in measured tones, "that I can still feel a little of what Harry feels, if he's feeling something strongly."

"Oh," she said, feeling herself go red. "I'm sorry..."

"Don't be," he said. "I've always known this would happen. I've been ignoring it, but I've always known it." He tried to grin at her, failed, and shrugged.

"Remember that time in the wardrobe back at the Manor?"

"Of course I do," said Hermione.

"Well, you kept saying 'Harry, Harry, Harry' the whole time."

"I did what?" She could feel her face burning. "Why didn't you say something?"

Draco shrugged again. "I'm sixteen," he said. "I'm not going to cut short a perfectly good make-out session on account of a little thing like that now, am I?"

Hermione covered her face with her hands. "I am *so* embarrassed," she said.

"Don't be," he said. "You've always been honest. You've never said you didn't love Harry. If I was you, I'd be in love with him instead of me as well." He grimaced. "What am I talking about? No, I wouldn't. I'm miles better than him. You're mad, Hermione."

"I do love you," she said.

He was quiet for a second. Then he said, "Yeah. I know. Just...like you love Ron."

She shook her head. "It's different. I've never felt about anyone the way I feel about you. I can't explain it. But you're important to me. Whether or not I'm with Harry, I don't want to not know you any more. I want to still see you. Have you come visit me this summer." She smiled tremulously. "Get jealous about the masses of girlfriends you're going to have as soon as everyone finds out about you and me not being together after all."

"Won't Harry mind?"

"No. He's sort of fond of you, in a weird way," she said, knowing it to be true. "I think he'd miss you if you just disappeared."

"I'd miss him as well, I think," said Draco. "I'd miss all the 'Shut up, Malfoy!'s. I've gotten used to it. Crabbe and Goyle never tell me to shut up. It's refreshing."

"I think we can count on Harry to tell you to shut up on a regular basis," said Hermione.

Draco was looking at her with a funny little smile on his face. "So," he said. "Are you and Potter...official now?"

"Official?" said Hermione, bewildered. "We didn't talk about it, not really, but..."

He took her hand and turned it over so he could see her watch. "It's one minute to three," he said. "Let's say your relationship with Harry becomes official at 3pm sharp, shall we?"

"Which gives us a minute to what, exactly?" she asked, but he shook his head at her and said,

"Hermione. You're wasting time."



Then, still leaning against the tree, he pulled her towards him by the hand holding her wrist-surprised, she stumbled forward, and fell against him. And he kissed her.

Later, Hermione would think that he had obviously put everything he had, every ounce of feeling for her, every last vestige of passion and every shred of frustrated love, into that kiss. As if he were trying to burn whatever it was he felt out of him, exorcise it, wring it dry. At the time though, she was only aware that her knees were buckling and there was a roaring sound in her ears as if someone were holding seashells over them. She shut her eyes and saw lightning dance across her inner lids.

She wondered if she might be the only girl ever to kiss two Magids in one day. Then she wondered if it might possibly be fatal.

He let go of her, and the world swam back into focus.

"Three o'clock, Granger," he said, and dropped her hand.

"Wow," she said weakly, and looked up at him. He was looking at her again with that funny little smile, half amusement, half regret. She knew he had just shown her how he really felt. And knew he would never, ever do it again.

He half-grinned at her. "So?"

"That was...amazing," she said faintly.

"And?"

"And if you ever try it again, I'll slap you."

His smile widened, became a real grin. "You love hitting me, don't you, Granger?" he said. "You might want to look into that."

She grinned back.

"Shut up, Malfoy," she said.

"What'd Ron say?" said Hermione, curiously.

"He said it was about time, then he made a rude remark which I am not going to repeat. Then he said he told me so."

"And what'd you say then?" asked Hermione, giggling.

"I turned his broomstick into a snail by pointing at it."

"Did you really?"

"I was going for turning it into a frog, actually," admitted Harry. "And Pigwidgeon ate the snail, so now I owe Ron a broomstick. This Magid stuff is a lot of trouble, really."

Hermione laughed, and reached for an apple. What a difference twenty-four hours makes, she thought. Yesterday it was raining and miserable, and now... They had brought their lunch down to the lake, as the sky had cleared completely and it was a beautiful June day. Harry was sitting with his back to a rock, and she was leaning against his knees.

"But you wouldn't want to not be one, would you?" she asked.

"I don't think so," said Harry. He was lazily playing with a lock of her hair, pulling the curl straight and then letting it bounce back. "I was talking to Dumbledore, and he said that he runs this sort of education program for untrained Magids over the summers in Ireland, and if I want to go this summer, I can."

"Do you?" she asked, turning around to look at him.

"Well, it isn't the Dursleys. And it's only two months. So I could come and see you in August."

"You know Draco's still coming to visit me, right?"

"I know," said Harry. "We can all hang out. Go to the beach. Watch Malfoy not get tan."

"Hey!" They both turned, and saw Draco running towards them around the perimeter of the lake. He came to a skidding halt in front of them, and stood there, leaning his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. "Harry-" he panted.

Hermione looked at him curiously. "Did you run all the way here?"

He nodded.

"Why?"

"I had to talk to *you*," he panted, looking at Harry. If the sight of Harry and Hermione together bothered him, he didn't show it. It was a talent he had. "Potter-" And Draco held out a white piece of paper to him. "I just got this-by owl post."

Hermione and Harry both stood up, and Harry took the paper from Draco. He unfolded it, read it, and went suddenly very white.

"Harry?" said Hermione, alarmed. "Is it bad news?"

Wordlessly, he handed her the letter. It was from Sirius.

Harry and Draco,

I decided to address this letter to both of you as this matter concerns you equally. I wanted to write to tell you two things. One, my motion to be allowed to legally adopt Harry has been accepted, and should be finalized within the next few months. I'm very pleased about this, and I hope you, Harry, are as well. Secondly, as, Draco probably already knows, Narcissa and I have been talking, and we're planning to be married in August, as soon as her divorce from Lucius comes through. I'm very pleased about this as well, and hope you will be too-

"What does he mean, as you already know, Draco?" she asked, bewildered, lowering the letter.

"That letter came with one from my mother, that was just addressed to me," said Draco, who was looking stunned. "It basically said the same thing. I can't believe it," he added, shaking his head. "I can't believe it!"

"So that's what he wanted to tell me that time in the common room," said Harry, looking equally thunderstruck.

"Sirius!" exclaimed Draco. "That sly dog! And literally, too!"

"Well, I figured this would happen," said Hermione, who was now pink with the effort of not laughing at their poleaxed expressions. "Didn't you?"

"No," said Harry and Draco in unison, shaking their heads.

"You do know what this means, don't you?" she said, pointing at the paper. "If they get married, and Sirius adopts Harry. You two will be..."

"*Brothers*," said Harry, staring at Draco in horror.

Draco stared back with his mouth open.

Hermione couldn't restrain herself any longer. "Brothers! The two of you!" She burst out into a peal of laughter. "The looks on your faces!" she gurgled. "Oh! The looks on your *faces*!"

Harry glared at her. "Hermione!"

"I can't help it!" she giggled. "It's too funny!"

And now Draco had started laughing, too. Harry had never seen him laugh like that before -- not just snickering, but really laughing. He actually sat down on the ground, put his face in his hands, and shouted with laughter. Slowly, Harry started to smile, and then, looking at Hermione bent over and clutching her stomach with mirth, he began to laugh as well.

The sound of their laughter, rising in pitch, drifted out over the lake and the lawns and up to the castle beyond.

THE END